

WARRIORS

GOOSEFEATHER'S CURSE



SHORT STORY
EBOOK
EXCLUSIVE!

ERIN HUNTER

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WARRIORS

GOOSEFEATHER'S
CURSE

ERIN
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HARPER

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DEDICATION

Special thanks to Victoria Holmes

ALLEGIANCES

	THUNDERCLAN
LEADER	DOESTAR —pale fawn-and-white she-cat with amber eyes
DEPUTY	PINEHEART —red-brown tom with green eyes
MEDICINE CAT	CLOUDBERRY —very old long-furred white she-cat with yellow eyes
WARRIORS	(toms and she-cats without kits) MUMBLEFOOT —brown tom with amber eyes LARKSONG —tortoiseshell she-cat with pale green eyes ROOKTAIL —black tom with blue eyes APPRENTICE, STORMPAW WINDFLIGHT —gray tabby tom with pale green eyes APPRENTICE, SWIFTPAW HAREPOUNCE —light brown she-cat with yellow eyes APPRENTICE, ADDERPAW SQUIRRELWHISKER —brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes APPRENTICE, ROCKPAW HOLLYPELT —black she-cat with green eyes APPRENTICE, SMALLPAW RAINFUR —speckled ginger-and-white she-cat with amber eyes STAGLEAP —gray tabby tom with amber eyes LITTLESTEP —black-and-white tom

QUEENS

with blue eyes

FLASHNOSE—dark ginger cat with white muzzle

(she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

DAISYTOE—gray-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes (mother to Moonkit, a silver-gray she-cat with pale yellow eyes, and Goosekit, a speckled gray tom with blue eyes)

FALLOWSONG—light brown she-cat (mother to Poppykit, a dark red she-cat with a bushy tail and round amber eyes, Heronkit, a dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes, and Rabbitkit, a thick-furred light brown tom)

APPRENTICES

(more than six moons old, in training to become warriors)

STORMPAW—blue-gray tom with blue eyes

ADDERPAW—mottled brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

SWIFTPAW—tabby-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes

SMALLPAW—gray tom with very small ears and amber eyes

ROCKPAW—silver tom with blue eyes

ELDERS

(former warriors and queens, now retired)

MISTPELT—thick-furred gray she-cat with green eyes

NETTLEBREEZE—ancient ginger tom

LEADER

SHADOWCLAN

HOUNDSTAR—brown-and-white tom

DEPUTY

CEDARPELT—very dark gray tom

MEDICINE CAT

LEADER

DEPUTY

MEDICINE CAT

WARRIORS

LEADER

DEPUTY

MEDICINE CAT

with a white belly

REDTHISTLE—dark ginger she-cat

APPRENTICE, SAGEPAW (white she-cat with long whiskers)

WINDCLAN

HEATHERSTAR—pinkish-gray she-cat with blue eyes

GORSEFOOT—gray tabby tom

CHIVECLAW—dark brown tom with yellow eyes

APPRENTICE, HAWKPAW (mottled dark brown tom with yellow eyes)

DAWNSTRIPE—pale gold tabby with creamy stripes

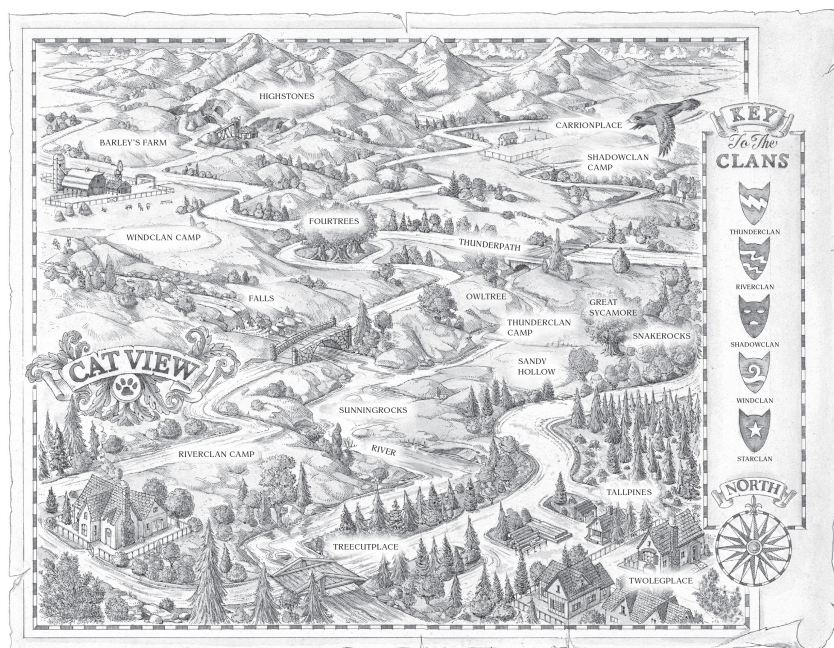
RIVERCLAN

VOLESTAR—brown tabby tom

HAILSTEP—thick-pelted gray tom

ECHOSNOUT—old black-and-white she-cat

MAPS







CHAPTER ONE



"The leader of TigerClan unsheathed his claws until they pierced the smooth spotted throat of the cat who sprawled beneath him. He lifted his magnificent black-striped head and glared at the warriors standing at the edge of the trees. 'This is my forest!' he roared. 'One step closer and I'll rip the fur from your leader's bones!'"

Goosekit whimpered and buried his nose under his thick gray tail. The elderly she-cat nudged him with her muzzle. "Don't be scared, little one," she purred. "It's only a story."

"But TigerClan is so mean!" Goosekit mewed, his voice muffled by fur.

"Goosekit! Where are you? Come outside!"

Goosekit lifted his head and scowled. "That's my mother," he muttered.

"It's a lovely day! You should be out here, not moldering in the den!"

The old she-cat nuzzled the top of his head. "Go on, scamp," she meowed. "We can finish the story later."

"But I want to hear it now!" Goosekit wailed. "What if I meet the leader of TigerClan when I'm a warrior? I need to know how to fight him!"

"There'll be time later, I promise. Now go find your mother. She's right; it is a beautiful day." The she-cat prodded him with her fat brown paw, and Goosekit stumbled reluctantly out of the nest.

He pushed his way through the thorns and emerged blinking into the sunlit clearing. The brambles that circled the clearing sparkled from the recent fall of rain, and the air was heavy with the scent of unfurling leaves and warm fresh-kill. Goosekit's belly rumbled, and he turned toward the pile of prey, but before he could take a step, a damp and prickly ball of moss knocked his legs from under him.

"Oof!" he grunted, tumbling onto his side.

A gray-and-white she-cat bounded over and stared down at him. "Oh, Goosekit!" she meowed. "Are you all right?"

"Of course he's all right!" huffed a silver-gray she-kit. She trotted up on sturdy, fluff-covered legs. "Aren't you?"

Goosekit lifted his head. "Yes, I'm fine, Moonkit," he panted. "I didn't see the moss ball coming, that's all."

Moonkit prodded him with her forepaw. "Get up! I want to play!"

A dark red kit with round amber eyes bounced up and flicked the moss ball away. "Come on, Moonkit! Bet you can't catch this!"

Goosekit's littermate spun around and raced after the ball as it rolled across the clearing. Poppykit followed, her longer legs keeping up easily. There was a flash of dark brown fur as her brother Heronkit charged to meet them. All three kits crashed together in a flurry of paws and tails, while the ball of moss kept rolling until it reached the fresh-kill pile.

Watching them, Goosekit winced. His mother licked the top of his head. "You should join in more," she urged him. "You won't get hurt."

Goosekit looked up at her. "Really? Then why is Rabbitkit in Cloudberry's den again? Did he fall off the half-tree? Get stuck in a bramble?"

Daisytoe shook her head. "He got a thorn stuck in his nose. He's clumsy because he hasn't grown into his paws yet."

Goosekit looked down at his small furry feet. "I don't want to stay this size forever," he muttered. "What if I never grow big enough to be a warrior?"

"That's not what I meant," Daisytoe began. She broke off as the gorse bushes at the entrance to the clearing quivered and several cats burst through.

A tortoiseshell she-cat with leaf-green eyes was at the head of the patrol. She dropped her catch—a plump young pigeon—on the fresh-kill pile and trotted over to Daisytoe. "You'd have loved it out there today," she mewed. "The prey was practically falling into our paws!"

For a moment Daisytoe looked wistful. "Maybe next moon, Larksong," she replied. "I need to get the little ones weaned first."

The black tom who had followed Larksong through the tunnel came to join them. A red squirrel dangled from his jaws. He placed the squirrel on the ground and brushed the tip of his tail along Daisytoe's flank. "I caught this for you," he purred.

"Thanks, Rooktail," Daisytoe meowed, her eyes lighting up.

There was a gasp from the other side of the fresh-kill pile. Goosekit saw a broad-shouldered gray apprentice staring at him. "Wow, Goosekit, is that really you? Or just a lump of moss shaped like you?"

Goosekit sighed as the cat trotted over and sniffed him. "I haven't seen you outside for days!" the tom went on. "Look, Rooktail! Your son doesn't melt in sunlight!"

The black warrior twitched his ears. "That's enough, Stormpaw. Go see if the elders want anything to eat."

Moonkit ran over, her stubby tail straight up in the air. "Stormpaw! Watch this! I've been practicing that move you showed me!" She crouched down, wagging her haunches, then sprang forward with her front paws raised. Her ears were flat back, and she curled her lip to reveal tiny sharp teeth. "Pretty fierce, huh?" she panted, dropping back onto all four paws.

Stormpaw nodded. "You scared me for sure! Do you want to help me take fresh-kill to the elders? Then I'll teach you another battle move."

"Yes, please!" Moonkit bounced on the spot, her yellow eyes shining.

Rooktail narrowed his eyes at Stormpaw. "You're the apprentice," he

reminded him. "Don't let the kits do your duties for you!"

"But I want to help!" Moonkit protested. "I hope Stormpaw can be my mentor when I'm an apprentice."

"Of course he won't be," Goosekit mewed. "He'll only just be a warrior!"

"Maybe, but he'll be the best warrior in ThunderClan!" Moonkit declared loyally. "Even better than Doestar!"

Stormpaw shuffled his paws. "Come on, Moonkit," he muttered. "Let's feed these elders."

Goosekit watched them pick up a blackbird from the fresh-kill pile and start hauling it toward the elders' den, where two ancient cats sat outside with the sun warming their pelts. Moonkit's eyes bulged with the effort of dragging the heavy bird. Goosekit winced as they almost collided with a slender white-furred tom, but somehow they missed him and the tom walked on and vanished into the gorse tunnel.

The other two cats on the hunting patrol, Harepounce and her apprentice, Adderpaw, were depositing their prey on the pile. Adderpaw twitched his tail toward Goosekit. "Come and try this mouse! I caught it myself," he added proudly.

Goosekit trotted over and sniffed at the brown-furred, still-warm body. It was huge, almost as big as him. Its nose was wrinkled slightly, exposing long front teeth, and its paws were clenched in tight little curls. Goosekit winced. He had shared some fresh-kill with his mother and Moonkit, but he preferred milk. Eating fresh-kill made his jaws ache.

"Don't you want it?" Adderpaw asked, sounding disappointed.

Goosekit gripped one of the mouse's front legs and started to heave it off the pile. As his hind paws scrabbled on the sandy earth, he was shoved roughly aside. A ragged ginger shape loomed over him.

"Watch out, Nettlebreeze!" Adderpaw called. "There's plenty of prey."

Nettlebreeze turned his cloudy gaze on the apprentice. "What? Did you say something?" He twitched his ears, and a lump of something yucky dropped onto Goosekit's head.

"Hey!" Goosekit protested. "Get off me! This is my mouse!" He shook his head, and a tick covered in mouse bile fell onto the floor.

The ancient cat bent his head and sniffed him. "Don't you know the warrior code? Elders and kits eat first!"

"I am a kit!" Goosekit mewed.

"Then you should learn to respect your elders," Nettlebreeze growled. He placed one paw on the mouse. "Leave me to eat in peace."

Goosekit backed away, his fur fluffed up with indignation. But he knew better than to pick a quarrel with the oldest cat in ThunderClan—maybe the oldest cat in all four Clans. Goosekit suspected Nettlebreeze had been alive when the four great oak trees had been nothing more than acorns. His tail spiked as he pictured the hollow that his mother had described to him, flanked by steep slopes and watched over by the mighty oaks. As soon as he was six moons old, Goosekit would be an apprentice, able to go to the Gathering every full moon and meet cats from the other Clans. Goosekit wasn't sure how much fun that sounded. He already felt a bit alarmed by how many cats there were in ThunderClan.

Goosekit headed back toward the nursery, swerving to avoid Heronkit and

Poppykit, who were wrestling over a stick. Their littermate, Rabbitkit, watched, a large leaf stuck on his pricked nose. "Go on, Poppykit!" he cheered, sounding as if he had his head stuck in a patch of ferns.

Goosekit was about to push his way into the den when Daisytoe stopped him. "Stay outside with me," she urged. "It's too nice to be inside. Don't you want to play with your denmates?" She nodded toward Moonkit, who was stalking across the clearing beside Stormpaw. The tip of her tongue poked out as she concentrated hard on copying his low, stealthy movement. Two full-grown warriors watched them, half hidden in the shadows under the brambles.

Goosekit curled into his mother's warm belly fur. "I'd rather stay with you," he mewed. "There are too many cats here."

Daisytoe purred. "No more than usual! These are your Clanmates, Goosekit. The cats who will feed and protect and train you until you are ready to patrol alongside them. They will always look after you."

"Stormpaw won't," Goosekit growled. "He's going to try to kill me."

Beside him, Daisytoe stiffened. "Don't say that! Stormpaw will look out for you, like all your Clanmates."

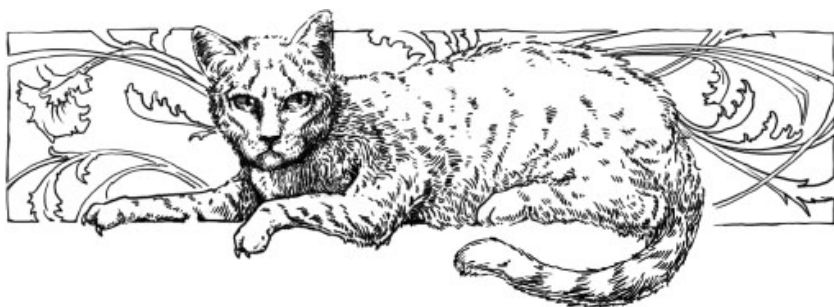
Goosekit shook his head stubbornly. There were pictures crowding into his head, as clearly as if they were right in front of him. "There will be a badger," he insisted, "and Stormpaw will leave me to fight it on my own."

"You're letting your imagination run away with you!" Daisytoe scolded him. "Stop it! You haven't even seen a badger yet."

"I know what they look like," Goosekit argued. "Big, with a long pointy face. They are black and white like magpies, but striped like TigerClan. They are angry and fierce and they eat kits!"

Daisytoe wrapped her tail around him. "You'll have to train hard and become a big strong warrior, won't you? Then you can fight off all the badgers on your own. Meanwhile, I think you should stop listening to the elders' stories. They're putting mouse-brained ideas into your head!"

Goosekit nestled closer to his mother's belly. In his head he saw the huge black-and-white creature looming over him, yellow teeth bared, drool hanging from its jaws. "I'm going to be really scared," he muttered. "I don't like badgers. Stormpaw is the meanest cat in ThunderClan!"



CHAPTER TWO



Goosekit crouched in the ferns, not daring to breathe. He could hear paw steps coming closer on the hard-packed earth, and the soft noise of his stalker tasting the air.

"I know you're in there!" a voice growled. Goosekit tensed, ready to push himself deeper into the ferns, but there was a rattle of fronds, and a dark red shape appeared in front of him with a yowl of triumph.

"Found you!" Poppykit declared. Her amber eyes shone. "Great hiding place, Goosekit! The smell of Cloudberry's herbs really hid your scent!"

Goosekit followed her out of the ferns, shaking shreds of greenery from his fur. Behind them, a voice rasped, "Are you kits playing hide-and-seek near my den again? I've told you not to flatten those ferns! They keep out the drafts!"

Poppykit rolled her eyes. "Cloudberry is such a grump! I bet she never played when she was a kit."

Goosekit nodded. "Playing probably wasn't allowed back then!"

"Hey, you found him!" Heronkit called from the half-tree outside the apprentices' den. All the apprentices were out on patrol, and it was too cloudy for the elders to bask outside, so the kits had the clearing to themselves.

Moonkit jumped down from the tree stump. "Your turn to look for us, Goosekit!" she called. "No peeking!"

Goosekit stood at the base of the half-tree, faced the rough brown bark, and closed his eyes. He flexed each toe in turn, letting the tip of his claws press briefly into the earth. When he had tested each claw, he opened his eyes and turned around. The clearing was empty apart from Fallowson, Daisytoe's denmate, rolling a ball of soiled bedding out of the nursery.

"They seemed determined to find the best hiding places!" she purred to Goosekit. "Good luck!"

Goosekit ran to the nursery first. His legs felt strong, and he could feel new muscles flexing underneath the pelt on his shoulders. In two moons he would become an apprentice. He couldn't wait to start learning how to hunt and fight so he could be a great warrior like his father, Rooktail. But he didn't want to learn

from Stormpaw like his sister, Moonkit. She had stars in her eyes whenever she looked at that big-headed apprentice. No, Goosekit wanted to learn from ThunderClan's best warriors, like Rooktail or even Doestar herself.

He slipped quietly into the nursery and looked around. It was dark and musty inside, full of warm scents of milk and fur. Daisytoe was out on patrol, and without the queens inside, the den looked much larger. Goosekit poked his muzzle into a heap of bedding. No sign of his denmates here. He whirled around and headed back into the clearing. His ears caught a faint sound from behind Highrock, just past the entrance to Doestar's den. Goosekit stared at the spot and opened his jaws to taste the air. The breeze carried a faint, familiar scent to him. He marched forward and pushed aside a prickly tendril that curled around the base of the rock.

Rabbitkit and Poppykit blinked at him. "That was quick!" Rabbitkit mewed. "We thought you'd never find us here!"

"I heard you moving around," Goosekit replied.

Poppykit scowled. "That was Rabbitkit," she complained.

"I sat on a nettle!"

Goosekit twitched his tail. "Go wait by the half-tree while I find the others."

He stood outside Doestar's den and gazed around the clearing, looking for branches that were moving too fast for the breeze, or flashes of pale fur between the leaves. Poppykit and Rabbitkit had stomped over to the half-tree and were lying beside it.

"Hey!" A low voice caught Goosekit's attention. A young black-and-white tom was beckoning to him from the shadows beside the warriors' den. "Are you looking for two kits?"

Goosekit nodded.

"The dark brown tom went behind the elders' den," mewed the tom. "And I think I saw the other one go into those ferns."

Goosekit's fur spiked. If Cloudberry caught Moonkit beside her den, they'd be in big trouble! "Thanks!" he called to the black-and-white cat. He bounded to the elders' den and squeezed behind it, screwing up his eyes so they didn't get poked by thorns. He almost fell over Heronkit, who was trying to make himself invisible by crouching behind a clump of thistles.

"Watch out!" Heronkit protested, wriggling out of the way.

"Sorry," Goosekit puffed. "At least I found you! Go join the others by the half-tree. I need to find Moonkit."

He turned around, not easy in the tiny, prickly space, and struggled back to the clearing. He could see the tips of some ferns waving beside the rock that sheltered the medicine cat's den. Goosekit hoped that he would find Moonkit before Cloudberry did. He ran over to the tunnel that led into the dense ferns and stuck his head between the pale green stalks.

"Moonkit! Are you in there?"

There was no reply. Goosekit sighed and pushed his way in. The scent of fresh and dried herbs was overwhelming this close to the medicine den, and it was impossible to pick up any other smells. But he spotted a tiny paw print in a damp patch of earth, and a dent at the stalks of some ferns, as if something had brushed past not long ago. He followed the trail and spotted pale gray fur glowing among the greenery.

"I see you, Moonkit!" he called softly.

There was a hiss of annoyance and his sister started heading toward him.

"Come on, before Cloudberry sees us," Goosekit urged. He turned and began pushing through the ferns just as a stir of movement close by suggested that Cloudberry had poked her head out of her den.

"Swiftpaw, is that you?" the old cat called.

Ducking his head, Goosekit nudged Moonkit past the last clump of stalks and into the clearing.

"I can't believe you found me so quickly!" Moonkit wailed.

"He found all of us too quickly," meowed Heronkit, narrowing his eyes. "I bet he cheated!"

"I did not!" Goosekit protested. His fur grew hot. He hadn't asked the black-and-white cat to help him! Any of the others could have been told where he was hiding when it was their turn to look.

"You must have," Poppykit insisted. "You didn't look anywhere else except where we were hiding!"

"I told you that I heard Rabbitkit move!"

"I don't believe you," Poppykit hissed. "I don't want to play with you anymore."

"Me neither," huffed Heronkit. He deliberately turned his back on Goosekit. "Come on, let's play something else. Without him."

Moonkit shot Goosekit an apologetic look. "It does seem like you cheated," she whispered.

Goosekit flattened his ears. "Whatever. I don't want to play with you anyway." He stomped toward the nursery. Maybe he'd find an elder to tell him more stories about LeopardClan and TigerClan. Those were real adventures, not like stupid games of hide-and-seek.

There was a rattle of branches as a patrol returned through the gorse tunnel. Goosekit sat down in the shadows beside his den and watched the long-legged, powerful-looking warriors spill into the clearing. Cloudberry puffed her way out of the ferns to meet them.

"Is all well on the borders, Windflight?" she asked the gray tabby who was sniffing at the fresh-kill pile.

Windflight nodded. "Twolegplace was as quiet as Fourtrees at new moon," he commented. "Those cats we chased off two sunrises ago haven't dared showed their noses again!" He lifted his head and looked around the clearing. "Is Swiftpaw back? I want to take her out for some battle training with Harepounce and Adderpaw."

Cloudberry narrowed her eyes. "I assumed she'd met up with you and joined the patrol. I haven't seen her since she left."

"No, she didn't join us. I thought you told her to fetch comfrey leaves and come straight back," Windflight meowed.

A dark ginger cat with a white muzzle trotted over to them. "Are you talking about Swiftpaw? Is something the matter?"

"Nothing to worry about, Flashnose," Windflight mewed. "Swiftpaw is taking longer than we expected to fetch herbs, that's all."

Flashnose turned in a tight circle. "She went out before we did. Something must have happened to her!"

Windflight touched her rump with the tip of his tail. "She'll be fine. She's almost a warrior now, and she's smart enough to take care of herself. Just like her mother," he added.

But the ginger she-cat refused to be comforted. "We must find her! What if she came across a fox?" She looked at the den below Highrock. "Is Doestar back yet?"

Cloudberry shook her head. "You're the first patrol to return. No one here but the kits and elders."

Another patrol returned, this time carrying the rewards of good hunting. As they started to drop their catch on the fresh-kill pile, Flashnose called to them, "Did any of you see Swiftpaw in the forest?"

Daisytoe tucked the tail of her fat gray squirrel onto the pile. "Not a whisker," she meowed. "I thought she went to fetch herbs."

"She did, but she's not back yet," Windflight explained. "I'm sure she's fine—"

"You can't be sure!" Flashnose hissed. "Swiftpaw is too young to be out on her own."

"We'll go back out to look for her," Rooktail meowed, coming to stand beside Flashnose. The other warriors in his patrol nodded.

Daisytoe trotted over to the kits, who were watching, huge-eyed. "Come on, into the nursery," she prompted. "I want you to stay there until I come back." As she ushered them past Goosekit, she included him with a sweep of her tail. "You too, little one."

"But we could help look for Swiftpaw!" Moonkit protested as Daisytoe pushed them into the den.

"Definitely not!" Daisytoe mewed. "It's bad enough that an apprentice has gone missing. We'll be back soon." She whisked around and Goosekit listened to the warriors thundering through the gorse. Their paw steps faded as they climbed the ravine and disappeared into the trees.

Rabbitkit scabbled crossly at the dried moss. "We totally could have helped!" he grumbled. "I'm nearly as big as the apprentices!"

Heronkit nodded. "It would be just like playing hide-and-seek!"

"Except we wouldn't cheat," mewed Rabbitkit, glaring at Goosekit.

Goosekit wasn't in the mood for defending himself again. When the others started to play a game of spot the ant at the far end of the den, he slipped through the brambles. The clearing was deserted except for Cloudberry dozing near the entrance and, tucked below Highrock, the black-and-white tom who had helped Goosekit find his denmates.

Goosekit trotted over to him. "You're an apprentice, aren't you?" he asked.

The tom stopped licking his chest fur and looked up. "That's right."

"Why aren't you looking for Swiftpaw? Can you go find her, please?"

The black-and-white cat looked unsure. "I don't think I can go by myself," he mewed.

A long-tailed warrior with brown striped fur padded past. "Hey!" the black-and-white cat called. "An apprentice has gone missing!"

The warrior stopped and fixed clear amber eyes on Goosekit. "Which one?"

"Swiftpaw," Goosekit replied. "She's got tabby-and-white fur and yellow eyes. Have you seen her?"

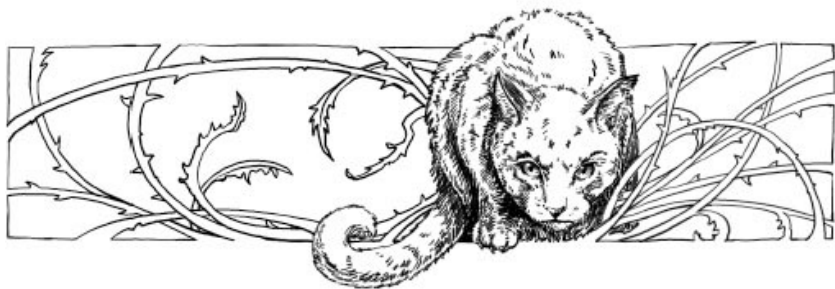
"Quite small, carrying herbs?" meowed the brown tom.

Goosekit nodded. "That's her!"

The warrior turned to walk away. "Oh yes, I saw her," he purred. "She was just below Sunningrocks, in the reeds."

Goosekit started to call after him, but the sun was in his eyes and he couldn't see where the warrior had gone. The clearing was starting to fill up with another returning patrol, and the ravine echoed with cries of alarm as Cloudberry woke from her snooze and told them what had happened.

Goosekit ran over to the warriors. Taking a deep breath, he stopped and stretched himself as tall as he could. "I know where Swiftpaw is!" he blurted out.



CHAPTER THREE



Several heads turned toward him.

"She's in the reeds by Sunningrocks," Goosekit went on.

Larksong pricked her ears. Beside her, Hollypelt looked skeptical. "You've never even left the camp," she meowed. "How do you know about the reeds beside Sunningrocks?"

Goosekit pressed his paws into the solid earth. "A warrior told me he saw Swiftpaw there."

"Which warrior?" asked Larksong, looking around.

"I . . . I don't know," Goosekit admitted. "He's not here now."

Harepounce rolled her eyes. "Fancy that."

"I'm not lying!" Goosekit insisted, digging his claws into the earth in frustration.

Larksong looked closely at him. Then she lifted her head. "We'll need to check the whole territory," she pointed out. "So we may as well start with Sunningrocks. Mumblefoot, Hollypelt, will you come with me?"

"Because a kit said so?" Hollypelt mewed. "I don't think so. Doestar and Pineheart will be back soon. I'll wait for them to organize search patrols."

"I'll come with you," Mumblefoot meowed, padding over to Larksong. He glanced at Goosekit. "It would be a funny thing for a kit to make up, don't you think?"

Larksong nodded. She whisked around and plunged back into the gorse with the sturdy brown tom at her heels. More cats emerged into the clearing before the thorns stopped quivering. This patrol was led by Doestar and Pineheart. The ThunderClan leader's face darkened as she heard about Swiftpaw. Hollypelt told her about the cats who had already gone out to search.

Doestar turned to her deputy. "It sounds as if Snakerocks and the Thunderpath boundary have been covered. I want you to take a patrol to the treecutplace and along the border with Twolegplace."

Pineheart dipped his head. "We'll go at once." He summoned the three warriors standing closest to him with a flick of his tail, then led them into the

tunnel at a run.

Almost at once, Flashnose, Rooktail, and their patrol returned to the clearing. Their tails drooped, and Flashnose's eyes were brimming. "We searched all the way to Snakerocks and back," she murmured. "But there was no sign of her."

Doestar rested her cream-colored tail on Flashnose's shoulder. "There are warriors spread through the whole forest," she meowed. "We'll find Swiftpaw, I promise."

Suddenly there was a crackle of branches, and a small, sodden figure draped in green slime stumbled out of the gorse.

"Swiftpaw!" Flashnose screeched, flinging herself on her daughter.

Larksong appeared behind Swiftpaw, her tortoiseshell coat dripping with bright green riverweed. "She was well and truly stuck!" the warrior reported. "Mumblefoot and I thought we'd never get her out of the reeds!"

Mumblefoot joined them. His brown fur stood on end, and there was a piece of reed stuck behind one ear.

"I hurt my leg," Swiftpaw whimpered. "I was following a frog and I got all tangled up. I thought the river was going to swallow me!"

"You're safe now, my precious," Flashnose purred. She lifted her head and gazed at Larksong and Mumblefoot. "Thank you for finding her! You saved her life!"

Larksong curled her tail over her back. "It's Goosekit you should thank. He told us where Swiftpaw had gone."

Flashnose tipped her head on one side. "How did you know? And why didn't you tell us at once?"

"A warrior told me," Goosekit mewed. "A dark brown tom."

"Are you sure it wasn't Squirrelwhisker?" mewed Rooktail.

Goosekit shook his head. "No! I know the difference between a tom and a she-cat!"

Pineheart stood over him, looking stern. "There are no other dark brown warriors in ThunderClan, Goosekit. Who told you where Swiftpaw was?"

Goosekit looked around, wishing the amber-eyed warrior would appear from the shadows. "I told you! I don't know his name!"

Daisytoe left her sister licking the slime from Swiftpaw's fur and came over to stand beside Pineheart. "You have to tell the truth," she meowed. "Have you been outside the camp on your own? Is that how you knew where Swiftpaw had gone?"

"No!" Goosekit yowled. "I *am* telling the truth!"

There was a faint scent of herbs as Cloudberry padded over. "I don't think we need to make a fuss about it," she rasped. "Swiftpaw is back, and that's what matters. Daisytoe, go help Flashnose clean her up before I take a look at her leg. Goosekit, you come with me."

Feeling very small beside the ancient white medicine cat, Goosekit followed her to where Doestar was standing. The leader looked at them questioningly. "Is something wrong, Cloudberry?"

"I'm not sure," she admitted. "Goosekit, I want you to describe the cat who told you where Swiftpaw was. Everything you can remember, from his nose to his claws."

"And you're not going to be angry with me?" Goosekit checked.

Cloudberry shook her head.

Goosekit closed his eyes and pictured the brown-furred warrior. "He had long legs, but he wasn't as tall as you, Doestar. His fur wasn't as thick as Cloudberry's, and his tabby stripes were really dark, almost black. Darker than Squirrelwhisker's." He opened his eyes and looked at the senior cats.

Doestar was staring at Cloudberry. "He must be mistaken," she murmured.

Cloudberry shrugged. "You would think so."

"Do you think it's a sign?" Doestar queried.

"I can't see how it could be," Cloudberry meowed. She twitched her tail. "I'll talk to him."

Doestar nodded. "I think you should." She walked away to join the others.

Cloudberry looked down at Goosekit. "That cat you saw. Has anyone ever described him to you before?"

Goosekit shook his head.

"And he didn't tell you his name?"

"No!" Goosekit was starting to feel frustrated. Why did it matter who had told him where Swiftpaw was, as long as the apprentice had been found?

Cloudberry gazed around the clearing. "Are there any cats here now whose names you don't know?"

Goosekit shrugged. Was he going to get into trouble for not knowing the names of every one of his Clanmates? There were so many of them!

"It's okay if you don't know," Cloudberry urged him gently, as if she could tell what he was thinking.

Goosekit narrowed his eyes against the bright sun. "Well . . . the black-and-white cat washing himself by the Highrock. I think he's an apprentice. There's an elder who tells great stories; I don't know her name, but she often comes to see me in the nursery. She has brown fur and green eyes. And there's a cat beside Nettlebreeze who I haven't seen before."

Beside him, Cloudberry tensed. "Tell me about that cat," she whispered.

Goosekit wondered if Cloudberry was losing her sight. "She's got pale orange fur, a white belly, and four white paws. She's watching him as if he's just a kit!" He purred with amusement at the thought of cranky, ancient Nettlebreeze ever being in the nursery.

Cloudberry nudged Goosekit's shoulder. "Let's go ask Nettlebreeze her name." She started to walk across the clearing. Goosekit trotted beside her, thinking it would be more polite to speak to the ginger cat directly.

As they reached the elders' den, Cloudberry hissed, "Let me do the talking." She raised her voice. "Hello, Nettlebreeze. You look comfortable out here. Tell me, do you know a pale orange she-cat with a white belly and white paws?"

The fur rose along Nettlebreeze's spine. "That's my mother, Dawnfeather," he growled. "Why are you asking about her? Has she spoken to you from StarClan?"

"StarClan?" Goosekit yelped. "But she's right—"

Cloudberry clamped her tail over Goosekit's mouth. "She asked me to tell you that she is watching over you, Nettlebreeze. All is well."

The old ginger tom grunted and put his chin on his paws. "It's a nice thought, I'm sure," he muttered, closing his rheumy eyes.

Goosekit bounced on his toes as Cloudberry steered him across the clearing to her den. They plunged through the soft green ferns and entered the den beneath

the broad expanse of rock.

Cloudberry sat down and curled her tail over her paws. "You can talk now," she puffed.

"What's going on?" Goosekit squeaked. "That orange she-cat was beside Nettlebreeze all the time! Why couldn't he see her?"

"Because she's dead," Cloudberry replied, fixing her yellow gaze on Goosekit. "She died many seasons ago, before I came to ThunderClan." She shifted her bony haunches on the dusty ground. "The striped brown tom who told you where Swiftpaw was? I think that was Beetail. He was Oakstar's deputy when I arrived. He was a great warrior, wise and kind."

"He . . . was?" Goosekit echoed. "You mean he's dead too?"

Cloudberry nodded. "As are the other cats you described, the black-and-white apprentice and the brown elder. I don't know who they are. They must have lived in ThunderClan a long time ago. Only you can see them, no one else."

"That's not fair!" Goosekit whimpered. "Why can I see all the dead cats?"

"I don't know," Cloudberry admitted. "StarClan didn't tell me." She rolled a piece of moss under her paw until it crumbled. "You have a great gift, Goosekit," she mewed softly, "but it is not one that all the cats will appreciate. You must keep it to yourself. Do you understand?"

Goosekit put his head on one side. "But they might like to know that their ancestors are here in the camp!"

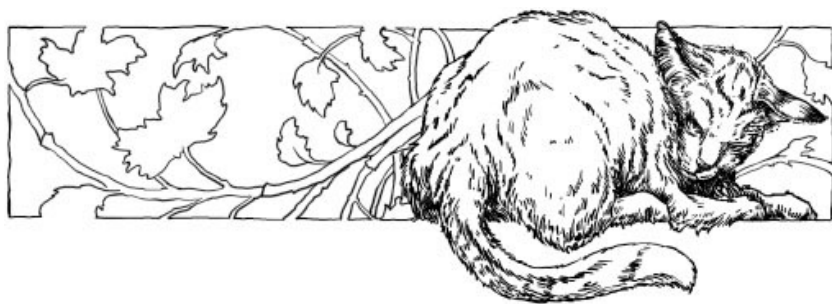
There was a flash of temper in Cloudberry's eyes. "It doesn't work like that!" she spat. "Warriors are raised to be suspicious of anything that doesn't come from the warrior code—and preferably from inside their own boundaries!"

Goosekit suddenly remembered what his mother had told him about Cloudberry, how she came from RiverClan after the ThunderClan medicine cat Ravenwing was murdered. Had the ThunderClan cats been unwelcoming at first? Even though they needed a new medicine cat?

Cloudberry had stood up and was pacing anxiously around her cave. "You will have to become my apprentice," she mewed, jerking his thoughts back to the present.

Goosekit gulped. That wasn't what he had planned. He was going to be a great warrior like Rooktail!

"Hopefully StarClan will guide me in how to train you to use your gift," Cloudberry went on. She stopped and stared at him. "What do you think, Goosekit? Would you like to be a medicine cat?"



CHAPTER FOUR



Doestar stood on top of the Highrock, her pale cream-and-fawn fur looking like clouds against the clear blue sky. “By the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name,” she declared. “Swiftpaw, from this moment you will be known as Swiftbreeze. StarClan honors your courage and your willingness to learn, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan.”

The tabby-and-white she-cat dipped her head self-consciously as around her the Clan exploded with cheers for the new warriors. “Stormtail! Adderfang! Swiftbreeze!”

Moonkit cheered too, but Goosekit, crouching beside her outside the nursery, felt too anxious to speak. The warriors started to swirl around the clearing, and the noise of chatter grew until it sounded like a flock of birds had filled the ravine.

“Wait!” *Doestar* silenced them from her place on the rock. “I have one more ceremony to perform. We have a new apprentice among us.”

The warriors circled back to sit below Highrock, muttering in confusion. “None of the kits are six moons old, are they?” Goosekit heard *Littlestep* ask *Flashnose*.

“No, I thought *Fallowsong*’s kits would be made apprentices next moon,” the ginger she-cat replied.

Among the cats closest to the nursery, Goosekit saw *Fallowsong* glance questioningly at his mother. *Daisytoe* looked away without speaking. Goosekit suddenly wondered if his mother was unhappy that he was going to be made an apprentice so soon. Was she afraid of breaking the warrior code? *It’s okay; I have a gift!* Goosekit sank his tiny claws into the earth, frustrated that he had to keep it a secret even from his own mother.

Beside him, Moonkit craned her neck to spot *Heronkit* and his littermates. “No way!” she squeaked. “Who’s going to be made apprentice? *Heronkit* didn’t say anything to me!”

“Goosekit, come forward!” *Doestar*’s voice rang out across the clearing.

There was a stunned silence. Goosekit stumbled toward the Clan leader and

stood beneath the Highrock. Doestar sprang elegantly down from the rock and touched the top of Goosekit's head with her chin before addressing the Clan. "Cloudberry is taking Goosekit to train as a medicine cat," she announced. "Goosekit, from this day on, until you receive your full medicine cat name, you will be known as Goosepaw. Your mentor will be Cloudberry, and I hope she will pass down all she knows to you."

Goosepaw felt the leader's breath hot against his ear fur as she licked his head. "Good luck, little one," she whispered, and Goosepaw felt the knot in his belly grow tighter. He kept his head lowered and screwed his eyes shut as there was an outburst of meowing behind him.

"What's going on? He's only four moons old!"

"He's far too young to be a medicine cat!"

"I don't want him to look after me if I get injured!"

Then a new voice, quieter and more rasping than the rest, but with a strength that made the other cats fall silent: "As your medicine cat, I ask you to trust me in this as you do in all other things," Cloudberry meowed calmly. "This is the right thing to do, I promise."

"Did StarClan tell you to do this?" challenged a voice that Goosepaw recognized as Rainfur's.

There was a pause; then Cloudberry mewed, "Yes. Our ancestors have chosen Goosepaw for a special path. I must do everything I can to help him follow that path."

Goosepaw took a deep breath and turned around. To his relief, a few cats called his name: "Goosepaw! Goosepaw!" He nodded gratefully to Larksong, Mumblefoot, and his sister, Moonkit. But the other kits were glaring at him, and the new warrior Stormtail curled his lip to show his long yellow teeth.

An image of an ugly badger, its black-and-white snout drawn back in a fierce snarl, flashed across Goosepaw's mind.

As Doestar vanished into her den and Pineheart began organizing patrols, the crackling tension in the air faded, and Goosepaw began to breathe more steadily. Several other cats nodded to him, not always recognizable among the blur of bodies and faces. Goosepaw wondered if they were dead cats; he tried to tell the difference, but it wasn't easy. He was fairly sure he saw Nettlebreeze's mother beside the entrance to the elders' den, and the striped brown tom who'd told him about Swiftpaw.

Nettlebreeze lurched past him, smelling of mouse bile and chewed grass. "Don't go getting any fancy ideas," he growled. "Kits becoming apprentices at four moons? It would never have happened in my day."

Goosepaw scowled, but Moonkit appeared on his other side, murmuring, "Don't listen to him. He's just cross because he's covered in ticks."

Goosepaw turned to face his sister. His fur felt hot with embarrassment. "I'm sorry," he blurted out. "I know it's not fair for me to become an apprentice before you."

Moonkit stopped him with a sweep of her tail. "I'm proud of you," she mewed. "Why wouldn't I be? You're going to be a medicine cat!"

"But . . . won't you miss me?" Goosepaw pressed. "I'll have to sleep in Cloudberry's den now."

Moonkit was looking past him at the warriors milling around. "I'll be fine,"

she mewed distractedly. "Do you think I could talk to Stormtail? Or will he think I'm a dumb kit now that he's a full warrior?"

Goosepaw followed her gaze. Stormtail was talking to Windflight and Squirrelwhisker, boasting about the size of the pigeon he had caught during his assessment. Goosepaw shrugged. "If you're willing to listen to how great he is, I'm sure he'd love to talk to you," he muttered.

Moonkit was already trotting across the clearing toward the warriors. Goosepaw felt the air stir behind him. Cloudberry was watching him from the entrance to her den. Goosepaw realized she was waiting for him. He dragged his paws toward the gap in the ferns, feeling as if he were falling into a deep hole from which there was no way out.

Goosepaw stared at the dizzying blackness waiting to swallow him. Every hair on his pelt stood on end, rippling in the soft wind that swept over the rocks. A huge white shape loomed toward him, carrying the scent of ancient stone.

"Come on, Goosepaw," Cloudberry grunted. "The moon will rise soon." She turned and headed back down the tunnel.

Goosepaw took one last glance over his shoulder. The hill rolled away behind him, down to the faint gray line that was the Thunderpath, before rising again to WindClan's bare moorland. Beyond that was the dense, dark mass of trees where ThunderClan slept, oblivious to the medicine cats' long journey for the half-moon Gathering. Goosepaw's feet hurt from the trek, and his mind still whirled with everything he had seen: not just the Thunderpath, the farm with noisy dogs, and the huge grassy fields, but also the faces of unknown cats, cats who his companions couldn't see.

A scrawny gray tom had died at his paws on the border of WindClan, and the hedge beside the Thunderpath had echoed to the wails of a lost kit calling for her mother. Goosepaw had tried to speak to them both, but they had looked straight through him as if they couldn't see him. Did that mean these things hadn't happened yet? he wondered. Was he seeing visions of things that would happen in the future? He shivered and ran to catch up to Cloudberry.

Here at Mothermouth there were three cats watching Goosepaw, their pelts so faint he could see the rocks behind them. They nodded encouragingly as he braced himself to enter the tunnel; Goosepaw decided they must be StarClan cats whose lives were already behind them. Far below, in the darkness, he could hear the medicine cats settling on the hard stone floor: Redthistle and Sagepaw from ShadowClan, Chiveclaw and Hawkpaw from WindClan, and Echsnout from RiverClan.

Goosepaw took a deep breath as if he were about to plunge into an icy river and stepped into the tunnel. The cold of the stone after the warm, heavy night took his breath away. "That's right, follow me," rumbled Cloudberry from up ahead. Goosepaw tucked in close to her furry haunches, inhaling her familiar herby scent, as they padded down and down.

After what seemed like forever, Goosepaw began to see his mentor's shape outlined against a fuzzy paleness. The tunnel opened up into a cave almost entirely filled by a huge glittering rock, bigger than Highrock, almost as big as the Great Rock, which Goosepaw had seen at Fourtrees on the journey here.

"I still think he's too young to be here," muttered Echsnout, lowering herself

onto the stone floor at the far side of the cave. "Four moons old? He should be suckling at his mother's belly." Goosefeather knew she had been Cloudberry's mentor in RiverClan, and the old medicine cat seemed to think she could still boss the ThunderClan medicine cat around.

"If Cloudberry believes that he needs to begin his training now, then who are we to argue?" meowed a deep voice. That was Chiveclaw from WindClan. He had been kind to Goosepaw on the journey, helping him squeeze under a prickly hedge and reassuring him that the hollering dogs couldn't get close.

"Why did I have to wait until I was six moons until you made me your apprentice?" whispered Hawkpaw. "Didn't StarClan send you a sign about me?"

Chiveclaw sighed in the darkness. "You became my apprentice when it was right for you," he replied. "Now be quiet and close your eyes. Make sure you're touching the Moonstone with your muzzle, remember."

Cloudberry nudged Goosepaw, and he shuffled forward on his belly until his nose scraped the sharp rock. He closed his eyes, then opened them again.

"Cloudberry?" he breathed.

"What is it?"

"We're going to see StarClan now, right?"

"Yes. You have to be very still and quiet for them to come to you."

"But I see them all the time, don't I? In the camp, on the way here. I bet if I looked around I could see some of them now!"

Cloudberry let out a sigh. "You haven't seen the most important StarClan cats yet. You need to be at the Moonstone for that."

Goosepaw wriggled around to look at his mentor. "How do you know? I can't tell you the names of all the cats I've seen. What if I don't need to do this at all? I could be a medicine cat already!"

"You've been my apprentice for precisely one quarter moon. Do you know any herbs? How to treat sickness? What to do if a queen is struggling to kit? No. You are most definitely *not* a medicine cat," Cloudberry mewed. She prodded his cheek with her front paw. "Put your nose against the Moonstone and go to sleep."

"Will you two be quiet?" hissed Echosnout.

"Sorry," whispered Cloudberry. She leaned forward and pressed her broad, flattened muzzle against the stone.

Goosepaw lay with his nose getting colder and colder as the cats beside him drifted off to sleep. He listened to their breathing slow down and felt the air grow still. He sighed. This stone was far too uncomfortable to go to sleep on, and his paws tingled from walking so far. He opened his eyes a chink. Above him, the crystal glowed from the light of the half-moon pouring down through the tiny gap in the roof. Goosepaw could see the shapes of the sleeping cats clearly on either side of them. Redthistle's apprentice, Sagepaw, stirred in her sleep, her white fur glowing like the rock. Goosepaw sighed. This was totally boring. He was getting cold, and he wasn't sleepy at all. He wondered how much trouble he would get into if he went back up the tunnel.

"Goosepaw! Goosepaw!"

Goosepaw stiffened. Someone was whispering. Had one of the apprentices woken up?

"Goosepaw!"

A pair of eyes gleamed like green stars in the shadows beside the Moonstone.

Two more orbs appeared, blinking, then more and more, until Goosepaw was surrounded by cats staring at him. They started to move toward him, a mass of shifting pelts turned to shades of gray and silver by the moonlight.

"We have been waiting for you, Goosepaw!" breathed one of them.

"A long time," hissed another.

"We watched you being born!"

"And now you must listen to us. We have so much to tell you."

Goosepaw took a step back, flattening his ears. "Wait. There are so many of you. . . . Can you speak one at a time, please?"

A black cat loomed into his face. "ThunderClan is doomed!"

"There will be a cat who burns like fire!"

"Trust no one, not even your Clanmates. Too many hearts are fickle."

"Beware the striped face and snapping teeth!"

Goosepaw tried to edge toward the tunnel. "Stop!" he begged. "You're scaring me!" He looked at the medicine cats, but they were still sleeping, still lost in their dreams of StarClan. But which cats were these around him now? Why hadn't they waited for him in his dreams?

"So much water, more than any cat has seen before . . ."

"You will find friends in unexpected places. Listen to what midnight tells you."

"The lake will run red with the blood of brothers!"

Goosepaw stubbed his toe on the entrance to the tunnel. With a yelp he turned and fled up the steep stone.

"ShadowClan will soar above you all!"

"Leopard and Tiger will feast on your bones!"

"Rivers of blood, washing away everything the Clans have known . . ."

Goosepaw ignored the pain in his feet as he raced up the tunnel. He could feel soft air on his whiskers, and a few moments later he burst into the open, flanks heaving and gasping for breath. He stumbled to a halt beside a pile of rocks and let the silence of the night wash over him. The StarClan cats had stayed in the tunnel. He was alone.

"Goosepaw! What are you doing?"

Goosepaw spun around. Cloudberry was standing at the mouth of the tunnel, glaring at him. "You can't leave the Moonstone before the ceremony is over! I still have to name you as my apprentice before StarClan. Come on, the others are waiting."

"StarClan knows who I am already," Goosepaw panted. "They came to me, all of them, with so many prophecies. I couldn't listen to them all; I was so frightened. They told me that terrible things are going to happen!" He broke off in a wail.

Cloudberry walked over and pressed her shoulder against him. "It's all right, young one. Calm down. We'll have to figure out a way for you to control those visions."

Goosepaw stared wildly at the she-cat. "They're not visions! These cats are actually here, all around us!"

"Then you'll have to find a way to ignore them," Cloudberry meowed. "There's more to being a medicine cat than talking with StarClan. There are herbs and ways of healing to learn, and omens to find. The other cats must see you preparing to be a medicine cat in the ways that they expect. Remember, no one

must know about your . . . your gift.” She said the last word reluctantly.

This isn't a gift, Goosepaw thought. I don't want to have all these cats around me! I don't want to be a medicine cat! I just want to be a warrior. He lifted his head and gazed at the star-flecked sky.

Find some other cat to talk to, StarClan!



CHAPTER FIVE



“Comfrey, marigold, borage, chickweed . . .”

“No, no, this one’s chickweed, and that’s mallow.” The she-cat reached out with one plump brown paw and patted the scraps of leaf. “Try again.”

“I don’t want to!” Goosepaw flopped back on the sun-warmed stone and looked up at the cloudless sky. The only sound was the river running beside Sunningrocks, punctuated by the occasional plop of a vole entering the water. “It’s too hot to remember anything. Tell me a story about LeopardClan, Pearnose. Please!”

“You’re not a kit anymore, Goosepaw! And you don’t deserve to be a medicine cat apprentice if you don’t start learning your herbs. Now, can you tell me what this is and what you’d use it for?”

Goosepaw stared at the limp green leaf hanging from Pearnose’s paw. It looked like comfrey, except that comfrey was furrier. Could it be chervil? No, that was thinner and darker. “Tansy, for treating coughs?” he guessed.

Pearnose shook her head. “No, it’s yarrow for vomiting. But you’re right that tansy is good for coughs.”

“See? I think my brain has melted. I can’t remember anything!” Goosepaw insisted.

“Who are you talking to?” Soft paw steps on the stone behind him made Goosepaw spin around. Moonpaw was watching him, her eyes narrowed.

“Uh—no one,” Goosepaw stammered, standing up so quickly that he mixed up his piles of leaves.

Moonpaw came over and studied the herbs. “Wow. They all look the same.”

“Tell me about it.” Goosepaw sighed.

“Are you sure there’s no one here?” Moonpaw pressed, looking around.

“Well, can you see anyone?” Goosepaw challenged.

“No, but . . .” *Your gift must be a secret!* Cloudberry’s words echoed in his mind. Goosepaw sighed. “Sometimes I talk to myself, that’s all. It’s easier to remember all the herbs if I say them out loud.”

“That’s kind of freaky.” Moonpaw’s blue eyes burned into him. “Cloudberry

doesn't talk to herself."

"I'm not Cloudberry," Goosepaw retorted.

"Moonpaw! Where are you?"

Goosepaw spotted a dark gray shape moving through the reeds on the far side of Sunningrocks. An image of a long pointed face, striped black and white and taut with fury, filled his mind. He pushed it away with an effort. "Stormtail's looking for you," he told his sister. "You'd better go."

Moonpaw was already bounding across the rocks. "Coming!" she yowled.

"Any cat would think he was your mentor!" Goosepaw called. "Don't make it too obvious how you feel about him, Moonpaw. It'll just make his head even bigger."

The silver-gray she-cat paused and looked back at him. "At least Stormtail is normal," she retorted. "Why do you have to be so . . . so *different*?" She whisked around and disappeared among the ferns.

Goosepaw grumpily swept the herbs into a pile.

"Hey! Don't mix them up!" Pearnose protested. "It may be greenleaf, but every leaf is worth saving."

"I'll pick some more," Goosepaw snapped.

"Not if you can't remember what they look like," Pearnose teased. Her tone softened. "Look, I know what it's like to be apprenticed to a medicine cat when your denmates are preparing to be warriors. It feels as if they'll never understand what you do. But nothing—no herb name, no healing trick—is more important than being loyal to your Clan. And that includes *all* your Clanmates, especially when you are a medicine cat."

"It would be easier to be loyal if they didn't treat me like a rogue," Goosepaw complained. "Perhaps I should just accept that I'll never have any friends because I walk a different path than they do."

Pearnose snorted. "Sometimes, Goosepaw, I think you make your path more different than it needs to be. When you're as old as me, you'll realize that all cats—kits, apprentices, leaders, elders—are all the same underneath their fur. Your Clanmates need to be able to trust you, to see you as one of them, if you are going to treat them when they are sick or injured. Now take these herbs back to the camp and check Nettlebreeze for ticks again. I don't think you used enough mouse bile on him yesterday."

Goosepaw stood up. *At least Moonpaw only has one mentor to boss her around!* Sometimes he felt as if Cloudberry and Pearnose would wear his ears off with their constant nagging!

He plunged into the ferns, reveling in the feeling of the fronds brushing against his pelt. He imagined this was what it would be like to plunge into a cool green river, cut off from the sky and trees and all the forest scents. . . . Goosepaw stopped. He could smell something beneath the ferns: newly cut wood overlaid with a sharp, sour tang that made his nose wrinkle. He had smelled it before, but where? *Twolegplace!* It was the scent of the wooden boundary at the very edge of ThunderClan territory. But he was nowhere near. Why could he smell it here?

Goosepaw's ears filled with a loud buzzing noise. He dropped the herbs as the ground rocked beneath his feet, making him lurch sideways. Now he could smell other cats—musty, unwelcome scents as well as the stifling odors of Twolegs and too-bright flowers. *Kittypets?* What were they doing so far into ThunderClan

territory?

Goosepaw blinked. The ferns had vanished—or at least faded until they seemed to be very far away. Instead he was at the edge of dense pine trees, standing in lush green grass beside the wooden Twolegplace border. Abruptly the buzzing in his ears was pierced by the shrieks and yowls of fighting cats, a writhing knot of fur that lurched toward him, then jerked away. Goosepaw stared in horror as more kittypets streamed over the wooden border and plunged into the fight. He strained to make out individual pelts—from the scent he knew that it was a ThunderClan patrol being attacked, but were these his Clanmates, or cats from long ago?

Goosepaw peered closer, trying to recognize each cat, but they were moving too fast, and too tangled up with their attackers. He winced as a thick-set ginger-and-white kittypet sank its teeth into a brown tabby neck.

“Those kittypets are stronger than you’d think,” purred a voice in Goosepaw’s ear.

He whirled around to see a tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat standing beside him. Her amber eyes gleamed with delight as she watched the battling cats.

“Who are you?” Goosepaw whispered.

The cat twitched her ears without taking her gaze from the fight. “Have I been forgotten so soon?” she murmured.

Goosepaw jumped as a cat thudded to the ground near his paws, flung by a kittypet with long black fur. He tried to make out the wounded cat’s face, but the buzzing had returned in his ears, and suddenly he was surrounded by ferns again. Goosepaw blinked. He was back on the path from Sunningrocks. The battling cats, the strange she-cat watching them, the pine trees, and the Twolegplace border had disappeared.

But Goosepaw couldn’t forget the shrieks of terror, and the bitter taste of fear clung to his tongue. He had never been submerged so completely in a vision before. Everything had been louder, brighter, more vivid than his previous visions. Pelt bristling, he raced through the bushes and plunged down into the ravine. He burst into the clearing, startling the apprentices who were standing at the fresh-kill pile.

“Are you being chased by a fox?” Heronpaw called.

“Goosepaw always smells of leaves. He’s more likely to be chased by a rabbit!” Poppyaw teased.

Moonpaw and Rabbitpaw huffed with laughter. Stormtail looked up from the other side of the fresh-kill pile. “You want to watch out, Goosepaw,” he purred. “Even rabbits can be dangerous when you don’t know how to look after yourself.”

Rabbitpaw reared up onto his hind legs and boxed the air. “This rabbit’s always dangerous!” he meowed, bringing his front paws down on Heronpaw.

The dark brown tom shrugged him off. “Stop messing around!”

Goosepaw noticed his sister watching him with a frown, as if she was worried about how he would react. He forced his fur to lie flat and lowered his tail. “No foxes or rabbits after me today,” he meowed. “Something spooked me, that’s all.” The shrieks of battling cats rang in his ears for a moment, and he shook his head to clear it. “Have you left any fresh-kill for me?” he asked.

“Goosepaw? Is that you?” Cloudberry pushed her way out of the ferns, sniffing. “Did you bring back the herbs that I gave you?”

Goosepaw's belly lurched. He had dropped all the leaves when he had the vision of the kittypet attack. "Er, not quite . . .," he began.

He was interrupted by Pineheart appearing from Doestar's den. "Is Squirrelwhisker's patrol back yet?" he meowed, looking around the clearing.

Larksong looked up from the pigeon she was sharing with Mumblefoot. "No, they're still out."

Pineheart narrowed his eyes. "But they went out before your patrol. What's taking them so long?"

Goosepaw froze. He pictured the warrior who had fallen at his feet in the thick of the battle. The image wasn't as clear as it had been before, but he remembered brown tabby fur, terrified amber eyes, long pale whiskers . . . Was it *Squirrelwhisker's* patrol being attacked by kittypets? Goosepaw was about to say something when he caught Moonpaw's eye. *She wants me to be normal, right?* He couldn't be certain it was his Clanmates in the fight. Goosepaw shut his mouth and turned back to the fresh-kill pile.

His first mouthful of vole felt as if it was choking him. The yowls of frightened cats kept echoing in his ears, and all he could smell was fear and blood and the sickly scent of Twolegplace.

"Are you okay?" Moonpaw asked him quietly.

Goosepaw shook his head. Abandoning the vole, he padded to the leader's den beneath the Highrock. Cloudberry was inside, talking to Pineheart and Doestar. Goosepaw stopped at the entrance and coughed.

"Goosepaw?" Doestar called. "Come in."

It was dark inside the den, and Goosepaw could hardly make out the shapes of the three cats. He stood in the doorway, blinking. "Cloudberry, I need to speak to you," he mewed.

One of the shapes moved toward him. "What is it?" She sounded cross, and Goosepaw's heart sank. Was his mentor in the mood for hearing about this?

"I saw something on the way back from Sunningrocks," he whispered, hoping Doestar and Pineheart weren't listening. "I . . . I was by Twolegplace, watching a battle between ThunderClan cats and kittypets. I think Squirrelwhisker was one of the cats."

Cloudberry leaned closer to him, her breath hot on his muzzle. "Do you think it was a vision of the future?"

Goosepaw swallowed. "I don't know," he confessed. "My other visions have felt different, more . . . distant. This one felt as if I was right in the middle of it."

The old she-cat narrowed her eyes. "You mean it could be happening right now?"

Goosepaw shrugged. "Like I said, I don't know. But I thought I should tell you."

Cloudberry straightened up. "You did the right thing." She turned to the other cats inside the den. "We should send a patrol to find Squirrelwhisker and the others. They could be in danger."

Doestar stood up, her pale fur glowing in the shadows. "What do you mean? Has StarClan sent you a sign?"

Cloudberry glanced at Goosepaw. "Not to me," she meowed. "But I think we should treat it seriously."

Goosepaw ducked his head as he felt Doestar's eyes rest on him. There was a

pause; then the leader mewed, "Pineheart, take a patrol of warriors and follow Squirrelwhisker's tracks. Cloudberry, do we know where we might find them?"

The medicine cat touched Goosepaw's flank with her tail. Without looking up, he muttered, "By Twolegplace."

"Right," meowed Doestar. "Go quickly, Pineheart."

The deputy hesitated, shifting from paw to paw. "Really? Because an apprentice says so?"

Goosepaw stared at a crack in the ground, wishing he could disappear into it.

Beside him, Cloudberry lifted her head. "And because I say so. Goosepaw and I are your medicine cats, remember."

Goosepaw risked a glance at Pineheart. The fox-colored tom was glaring at Cloudberry. Suddenly the scent of kittypets grew stronger, filling Goosepaw's nose and mouth until he thought he was going to choke. He whirled around, frightened that the kittypets had stormed the camp and were about to invade Doestar's den. But everything was quiet, and none of the cats beside him had moved.

"Just go, Pineheart," Doestar ordered. "Say nothing to the others about the possibility of trouble, but there's nothing to be lost by making sure Squirrelwhisker's patrol is safe."

The deputy dipped his head and slipped past Goosepaw out of the den. Doestar looked at Goosepaw for a few moments, then turned to Cloudberry. "I hope I was right to trust you," she murmured.

I'm not making this up! Goosepaw thought fiercely.

Cloudberry brushed her tail against him. "Come on," she mewed. "We need to sort out our stocks if there are going to be wounds to treat." Nodding to Doestar, she led him out of the den.

The apprentices were watching the gorse tunnel, which still quivered from the rapid exit of Pineheart's patrol. "What's happening?" asked Rabbitpaw.

"Pineheart has gone to check that Squirrelwhisker's patrol is okay," Cloudberry replied lightly. "Nothing to worry about." She padded into the ferns, then looked back at Goosepaw, who had stopped. "What's wrong?"

Goosepaw stared at the gorse, picturing Pineheart and the warriors racing through the forest to the border with Twolegplace. Would they be in time to help Squirrelwhisker? "I wish I could have gone with them," he mewed.

"You're not trained to fight," Cloudberry reminded him. "That's not what a medicine cat does. Now, are you going to help me with these herbs? Seeing as you left a good portion of them somewhere in the forest today. . . ."

Goosepaw was trying to brush a wad of cobweb off his paws when he heard the thunder of cats entering the camp. He rushed out of the den with sticky white web trailing behind him. "Wait for me!" Cloudberry called behind him, but Goosepaw ignored her and plunged through the ferns.

The clearing was thronging with cats, swirling like fish in a tiny pool. Goosepaw stood on tiptoe and spotted Pineheart, Stormtail, Larksong . . . all cats who had gone to look for the missing patrol. The crowd shifted, and suddenly Goosepaw saw a dark brown shape huddled on the ground, oozing scarlet trails. Squirrelwhisker! He started forward, but Cloudberry was already running past him.

"Let me through!" she yowled, and the cats stepped aside to let her crouch

beside the injured warrior. Goosepaw saw the rest of Squirrelwhisker's patrol now: Stagleap, Rockfall, Flashnose, all battered and bleeding and looking shocked but on their feet.

"They were being attacked by kittypets," Pineheart reported to Doestar. "They were outnumbered, and the kittypets took them by surprise. We sent them packing with a few scratched ears, I promise."

"Thank StarClan you found them!" gasped Fallowsong. She had been on a hunting patrol, which had just returned.

"They were lucky that Pineheart went looking for them," Rainfur agreed.

"It was nothing to do with luck," Doestar meowed.

Goosepaw felt his fur grow hot. Cloudberry glanced over her shoulder at him and gave a faint shake of her head, as if warning him that his secret would be safe with her. But Doestar was already bounding onto the top of Highrock and calling the Clan together.

"Let all those cats old enough to catch their own prey gather below!" she yowled. "We need to thank StarClan for the victory over the battle with kittypets today—and not only StarClan." She looked down at Goosepaw, who felt the cats around him take a step away, leaving him in a bare patch of sand. "Squirrelwhisker and her patrol owe their rescue to one of their Clanmates. An apprentice, no less! It was Goosepaw's vision that led Pineheart straight to the attack. Cats of ThunderClan, we have a powerful medicine cat among us! And Cloudberry, if you agree, I would like Goosepaw to receive his full name as a sign of our gratitude and pride."

Goosepaw blinked. Behind him, he heard the apprentices muttering in disgust.

"He's only been training for three moons!" Poppypaw complained.

"I've only been an apprentice for a moon!" wailed Moonpaw. "That's not fair!"

"What makes you so special?" growled a voice in Goosepaw's ear. It was Stormtail.

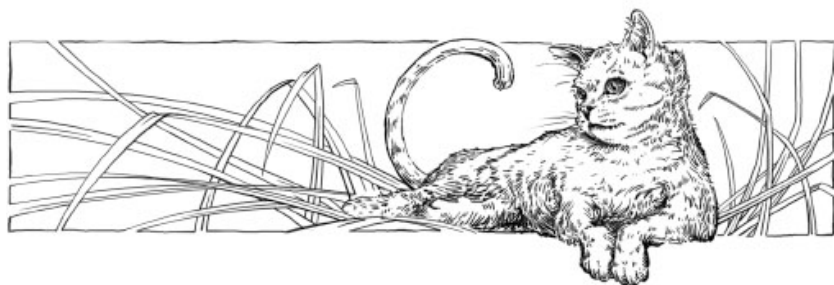
Goosepaw spun around and glared at the warrior. "You have no idea what I can do!" The image of a badger loomed over him. *If all my visions come true, then so will this one! Stormtail is going to try to kill me with a badger!* Goosepaw sank his claws into the earth to keep himself steady. "I know what you're going to do," he hissed. "And I'll be ready, just you wait and see!"

Stormtail looked baffled. "You're weird."

Cloudberry stepped out of the crowd and dipped her head. "You are very generous, Doestar. I will gladly give Goosepaw his full name at the next half-moon. But I am sure he knows that he still has much to learn, and his training will continue until I am called to StarClan." She fixed her clear yellow gaze on Goosepaw and he nodded.

Goosepaw ignored the glares of fury coming from Rabbitpaw and Stormtail. They were only jealous. He glimpsed Squirrelwhisker through the crowd, raising her head just enough to nod gratefully to him. Goosepaw felt a stirring of pride in his belly.

No other cat sees as much as I do! I will keep my Clan safe forever!



CHAPTER SIX



“Goosepaw, do you promise to uphold the ways of a medicine cat, to stand apart from rivalry between Clan and Clan, and to protect all cats equally, even at the cost of your life?”

Goosepaw bowed his head in the glittering light of the Moonstone and tried to ignore the murmurs that came from the shadows. As always, the little cavern was full of watching eyes, voices whispering to him on the cusp of his hearing, dire threats and prophecies echoing around the stone walls. It seemed as if every cat in StarClan came here to pour their warnings into his ears—warnings that he couldn’t distinguish, that only made his pelt crawl and his tail fluff up with fear.

“I do,” he replied.

“Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your true name as a medicine cat. Goosepaw, from this moment you will be known as Goosefeather. StarClan honors the power of your sight, and we welcome you as a full medicine cat of ThunderClan.” Cloudberry rested her muzzle briefly on top of his head, then stepped back.

“Goosefeather! Goosefeather! Goosefeather!” whispered the unseen cats.

Goosefeather winced; then Sagepaw cheered, “Goosefeather!” The air in the cave instantly felt warmer. Goosefeather blinked gratefully at the white-furred ShadowClan apprentice.

“Welcome to life as a medicine cat, Goosefeather,” meowed Chiveclaw of WindClan. His apprentice, Hawkheart, who had received his full name at the last half-moon, nodded.

Echosnout sniffed. “I hope he doesn’t get any fancy ideas about knowing as much as the rest of us,” she muttered.

Cloudberry raised her tail. “Goosefeather knows he’ll never stop learning,” she purred.

Goosefeather fought down a flash of anger. *I can already do more than any of you! I see all the cats that have gone before us, and things that have not yet happened. You have no idea what powers I have!*

The voices grew louder inside his head, as if the unseen cats knew what he

was thinking.

"Blood will spill blood!"

"Darkness, air, water, and sky will come together!"

"He is a kittypet!"

"Water will destroy her!"

"Only fire will save the Clan!"

Shut up! Goosefeather screeched silently. *It's too much! I don't know what you're talking about!*

Sagepaw's mentor, Redthistle, shook her dark ginger pelt. "Time to go home," she mewed. "I'm so cold I can't feel my paws." She limped out of the cave with Sagepaw beside her.

Cloudberry nodded to Goosefeather, and he fled up the tunnel, pushing past the ShadowClan cats. The voices faded behind him, and he took deep breaths of the cold night air. He knew his gift was special, and that he had no choice but to serve his Clan as a medicine cat. But here, far underground, in the shimmering light of the moon-bathed crystal, Goosefeather's gift seemed more than he could possibly bear.

"Great StarClan! Are we out of borage already?" Cloudberry stuck her head farther into the cleft in the rock, then withdrew it, sneezing. "Nothing but dust back there. You'll need to gather borage as well, Goosefeather."

He rolled his eyes. "At this rate I'll be bringing back half the forest," he meowed. "Can't I take one of the apprentices with me?"

Cloudberry shook a scrap of leaf off her ear and fixed him with her gaze. "As far as I'm concerned, you *are* an apprentice. It was Doestar's idea to give you your full name, not mine."

Goosefeather bristled. "I earned it! I saw the kittypets attacking our patrol!"

The old white cat turned back to her piles of leaves. "Your visions are a gift from StarClan. Everything else will have to be learned. Now go fetch those herbs while they're still green."

Goosefeather ducked through the ferns, which were turning brown at the tips as the weather cooled and the days grew shorter. In the clearing, the apprentices had just returned from a border patrol with their mentors. Goosefeather nodded to them, but they just stared at him. Goosefeather felt a flash of annoyance. Why did they treat him like an outcast? Didn't they understand how important his powers were? Even Moonpaw looked down at the ground as he walked past.

"Don't start thinking you're better than us just because you got your name!" hissed Rabbitpaw.

"I heard that," growled his mentor, Mumblefoot. But he didn't make Rabbitpaw apologize; on the contrary, Mumblefoot shook his head as Goosefeather padded by. *Do all my Clanmates resent my new name?* Goosefeather wondered.

Larksong, her belly swollen with kits, blinked sympathetically at him. "Don't let them bother you," she whispered. "It's just taking everyone a while to get used to the idea of such a young medicine cat."

Goosefeather shrugged. "Not my problem," he mewed.

He pushed into the gorse tunnel, wincing as a tuft of his gray fur got caught on a spike. He climbed out of the ravine and headed straight into the forest. There

was a patch of comfrey halfway to Fourtrees that had still had several green plants last time he visited. The trees were silent, and the air was still except for occasional crisp brown leaves drifting down. One brushed against Goosefeather's nose, and he purred in amusement. At first it had been alarming to watch the forest fade and turn brittle, but Cloudberry had reassured him that it would come back to life in newleaf, after the long, cold moons of leaf-bare.

He reached the comfrey and started to pick the biggest leaves, nipping them low down on the stalk to make them easier to carry. He was just stacking them in a pile when he heard a crashing sound beside him. Goosefeather spun around just as a clump of bracken split apart and Stormtail burst through.

The blue-gray warrior paused when he saw Goosefeather, and bared his teeth. "Watch out!" he snarled. He sprang past Goosefeather and vanished into the brambles.

There was a single moment of stillness, and suddenly Goosefeather knew exactly what was about to happen. He had known about this since he was the tiniest kit, and in a way he had been waiting for it all his life. This had been his very first vision, and like all the rest, it was doomed to come true.

The forest drew breath around him, and a huge black-and-white shape loomed through the bracken, bellowing in rage. Goosefeather braced himself. The badger had found him.

It was far bigger than he had imagined, but the narrow, striped face was the same, and the sharp teeth dripping with saliva. The creature fixed beady black eyes on him and lunged toward him with a roar. There was no time to recall any of the battle moves Goosefeather had seen being practiced by the apprentices. He dropped to the ground and curled himself into a tiny ball. The terror he had felt as a tiny kit flooded through him, clamping his chest like talons. "*Daisytoe!*" he whispered.

The badger landed with a thud on all four paws, trapping Goosefeather under its belly. Its fur stank like rotting flesh, and its hair was coarse and bristly. Goosefeather tried to wriggle free, but the badger spun around far more quickly than its size suggested and held Goosefeather down with one massive paw. Huge sharp claws sank into Goosefeather's pelt, and he lay still, too scared even to shiver.

Is this how it ends? he wondered, his mind strangely clear. *If I see a dead cat now, will he be coming to take me to StarClan?*

The badger seemed puzzled by his lack of resistance. It rolled him roughly onto his side and lowered its head to sniff at him. Goosefeather retched as foul breath filled his nose. Then the badger curled back its lips, revealing cracked yellow teeth, and Goosefeather suddenly knew that he didn't want to die.

He let out a screech, bucking wildly under the badger's paw until he could tear himself free. With a snap, the badger shut its jaws and lunged for Goosefeather again. Goosefeather knew there had to be something he could do to defend himself, some clever twist of claws or teeth, but all he knew were herbs. And dead cats.

"Help me!" he yowled.

The badger grunted as if it liked the idea of prey that made a noise. It slapped Goosefeather to the ground with its front paw and loomed over him. A globule of drool fell into Goosefeather's eye.

"Get off him!" There was a shriek behind the badger, and the massive head jerked away from Goosefeather. Blinking away the drool, he spotted a small silver shape clinging to the badger's shoulders. "Leave him alone!"

"Moonpaw! What are you doing?" Goosefeather yowled.

His sister didn't look up from jabbing her claws into the badger's neck. "Saving you, mouse-brain. Get out of here while you can!"

The badger was twisting and snapping at the tormentor on its back. One of its flailing front paws almost knocked Goosefeather off his feet, but he scrambled under brambles until he was out of reach. *I can't leave Moonpaw to fight it on her own*, he thought desperately. But he knew there was nothing he could do to help her. He had no fighting skills.

Suddenly there was a thrumming of paws, and a horde of blurry shapes flew at the badger. Yowls split the air, and the badger hunched under the warriors' attack. Goosefeather saw Daisytow tear the badger's ear with her claws, while Windflight savaged its stumpy tail. Moonpaw sank her teeth once more into the badger's scruff; then the mighty animal let out a bark and started to shuffle away into the bracken. One by one, the warriors dropped to the ground and chased after it, still spitting and snarling.

Only Moonpaw remained, her sides heaving and blood welling from a scratch above her eye. "Goosefeather!" she panted. "Are you there?"

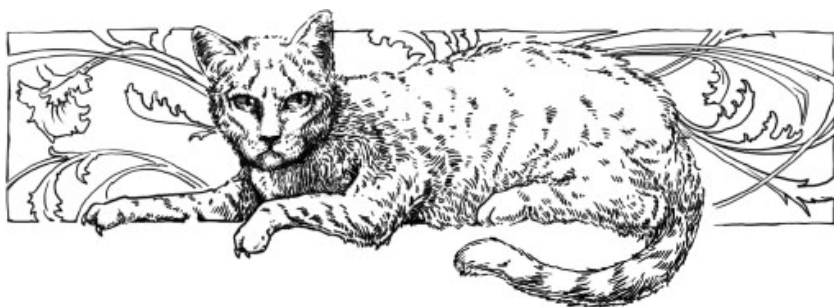
Goosefeather crawled out from beneath the brambles. "I'm here," he meowed. "You saved my life, Moonpaw! Thank you!" He stood up and tried to rub his muzzle against her head, but she ducked away.

"You shouldn't be out on your own if you can't defend yourself!" she hissed. "I can't believe you've been given your full name when you don't even know how to fight."

Goosefeather shook his head. "Wait, it's not my fault the badger attacked me. It was Stormtail—"

Moonpaw stared at him. "Really? You're going to blame Stormtail for this? Who do you think found the patrol and told them what was happening? I don't believe you, Goosefeather. You put all our lives in danger today. I won't always be here to save you. Try living in the real world for a while, and learn how to look after yourself!"

She brushed past him and bounded into the bracken, following the trail left by the badger.



CHAPTER SEVEN



"I'd say you've been very lucky," purred a soft voice.

Goosefeather jumped. He hadn't noticed the tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat standing beside him. "You think?" he retorted. "I nearly get my fur clawed off by a badger, and even my sister thinks I'm a freak." He paused and studied the cat. "I've seen you before, haven't I? You were watching the attack by the kittypets. Who are you?"

The she-cat twitched one ear. "I'd be insulted that you don't know, except that I can hardly blame ThunderClan for wanting to forget about me. But I know all about you, Goosefeather, and what you can see. I can help you, if you like."

"Really? Are you going to show me another vision?" Goosefeather felt his energy returning.

The she-cat snorted. "Why are you so concerned about the future? You have to live in the real world too. You need to learn a few fighting moves, or any cat will be able to flay your pelt if they want to." She padded around him, and Goosefeather was aware of powerful muscles sliding beneath her thick fur. "In fact, there is no better warrior to teach you how to fight."

Goosefeather turned around to keep her in sight. "I could ask any of my Clanmates to teach me," he mewed. "I don't need your help."

The she-cat stopped and looked at him. "Oh, I think you do, Goosefeather," she mewed softly. "After all, not even your sister offered to help, even when she had just seen you being half eaten by a badger."

Goosefeather felt the hair rise along his spine. He didn't need a stranger to taunt him. "Leave me alone," he snarled, but without another word the she-cat sprang at him, claws unsheathed.

Goosefeather stumbled backward, tripping over his own tail, and landed in the leaf mulch. The tortoiseshell cat stood looking down at him, her lip curled in amusement. "Get up. When I do that again, duck sideways so you take my weight on one shoulder. If you keep your hind legs under you, you should be able to flick me off." She stepped back, letting Goosefeather scramble to his paws. "Ready?"

He nodded. She leaped forward, and this time Goosefeather lurched to the

side. A frond of bracken jabbed him in the eye and he almost lost his footing, but he felt the she-cat strike him nothing more than a glancing blow as she crashed to her paws.

“Better!” she cried. “Now you try!”

Goosefeather shook his head. “I only want to defend myself. I won’t be attacking anyone.”

The she-cat hissed. “You’ll be useless if you can’t take the fight to your enemy. Attack is by far the best form of defense! Now come to me, and watch what I do.”

Reluctantly Goosefeather sprang at her, halfheartedly baring his teeth. The she-cat stepped to the side and wrapped one paw around his front leg, sending him sprawling to the ground. “You’re making it too easy,” she hissed. “Try again, and this time act like you mean it. Pretend I’ve just clawed out your mother’s eyes.”

Goosefeather pictured Daisytoe bleeding and blind, and lunged at the she-cat with real fury. She tried to step away again, but he kept his weight over his haunches and followed her. His front paws landed a satisfying blow on the back of her neck. The she-cat huffed and straightened up.

“Much better!” she purred, her eyes gleaming. “Now let’s try some ground moves.”

The shadows crept out from beneath the trees and the air turned chilly as they fought. The she-cat showed Goosefeather how to use his own weight against his opponent, how to anticipate a move by watching his enemy’s paws, and how to pummel the soft parts of the belly and throat to cause the worst injuries. Sometimes Goosefeather flinched, and a small voice inside him asked if it was right that a medicine cat should know how to cause so much pain. Then he remembered Moonpaw blaming him because he couldn’t defend himself against the badger, and he let his claws slide out as he raked his mentor’s pelt.

She screeched and sprang away. “Careful, little one!” she spat. “You don’t want me to fight for real, I promise you.” She licked her ruffled chest fur. “I think we’ve done enough for today. I wouldn’t say you’re ready to take on another badger, but I think you could hold your own against a cat.”

Goosefeather nodded, panting. “Thank you. Really. I can’t believe I didn’t know any of this before.”

The she-cat glanced sideways at him. “Just don’t go looking for an excuse to practice on Stormtail,” she teased.

Goosefeather stiffed in surprise. “You know Stormtail?”

“Oh, I know every one of you.” She started to walk into the bracken.

“What is your name?” Goosefeather called after her.

The she-cat carried on walking without looking back. “Mapleshade,” she mewed.

Limping from a sore shoulder where Mapleshade had wrenched him off his paws, Goosefeather headed back to the ravine. Moonpaw was approaching from the other direction. She ran up when she saw him, her fur fluffed out in alarm.

“I’ve been looking for you! I’m really sorry for running off like that,” she blurted out. “I was frightened for you, that’s all. We drove the badger off the territory, so you’ll be safe now.”

Goosefeather shrugged. “You were right. I do need to learn how to take care of

myself.”

“But you’re a medicine cat. It’s the duty of the warriors to keep you safe.” Moonpaw followed him as he started to walk down the path. “I could show you some moves, if you like. Windflight says I’m doing really well.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll figure something out on my own,” Goosefeather meowed without stopping.

“But you can’t be on your own all the time!” Moonpaw protested. “Don’t you get lonely? It’s not normal, not having friends.”

Goosefeather halted and spun around, hissing. “Don’t you understand? This is my normal. Get used to it, because nothing’s going to change.” He turned and ran the rest of the way down to the gorse bushes.

Stormtail was standing beside the fresh-kill pile. Goosefeather walked up to him and put his mouth close to the warrior’s ear. “I know what you did,” he hissed. “You left me alone with that badger because you wanted me to get hurt.”

Stormtail turned to him, bristling. “Don’t be so absurd!” he meowed. “I ran to fetch help!”

“You brought it to me deliberately! If I had died, my blood would be on your paws! Moonpaw saved my life!”

“Thank StarClan for your brave sister, then,” Stormtail purred. “She’s a wonderful cat.”

“Leave Moonpaw out of this!” Goosefeather snarled.

He was interrupted by Smallear racing up to him. “Cloudberry needs you in the nursery. Larksong is having her kits!”

Goosefeather glared at Stormtail. “This isn’t over,” he spat. He spun around and raced to the nursery. From inside, he could hear Larksong panting and Cloudberry talking quietly to her. Goosefeather slipped through the branches and crouched beside the medicine cat.

“Ah, good, you’re here,” she murmured in the same soothing tone. “Larksong, Goosefeather has arrived just in time to welcome your first kit. One more push!”

The tortoiseshell she-cat let out a gasp as a spasm rippled along her flank. Goosefeather stared, fascinated, as a tiny wet bundle slid from beneath Larksong’s tail. Cloudberry drew the bundle toward her with one paw and nipped through the transparent layer that surrounded it. “Here you go,” she mewed, nudging it toward Goosefeather. “Start cleaning him up.” She turned to Larksong and ran one paw along the she-cat’s flank. “You have a beautiful son,” she purred. “But I think there’s another to come. Don’t give up now.”

Goosefeather began to lick the tiny kit’s damp fur, keeping one eye on Larksong. A heartbeat later there was a second bundle lying in the moss. Cloudberry pushed it toward Larksong’s head. “Another tom,” she meowed. The little cat opened its jaws in a high-pitched wail. “With a loud voice already,” Cloudberry purred. “Come on, Larksong, clean him up so they can have their first feed.”

Goosefeather felt his kit start to wriggle beneath his tongue. “I think this one’s hungry,” he mewed.

“Put him next to Larksong’s belly,” Cloudberry instructed. “He’ll know what to do.”

Goosefeather stared in awe as the kit nosed its way into Larksong’s fur and latched onto a teat. “Amazing,” he breathed.

"I agree," mewed Cloudberry softly. "I never get tired of this moment."

The second kit joined his brother, and Goosefeather watched them suckle. Larksong lay back and closed her eyes. Cloudberry started to pull away the stained moss. "We'll freshen up her nest and leave her in peace," she whispered.

Goosefeather rested one paw on the kit he had cleaned. At once, images burst into his head, tumbling and flashing in a blur of senses: the Moonstone, the strong smell of herbs, a gaping wound padded with thick white webs, glittering starlight full of voices. He looked up at Cloudberry. "He's going to be a medicine cat!" he breathed.

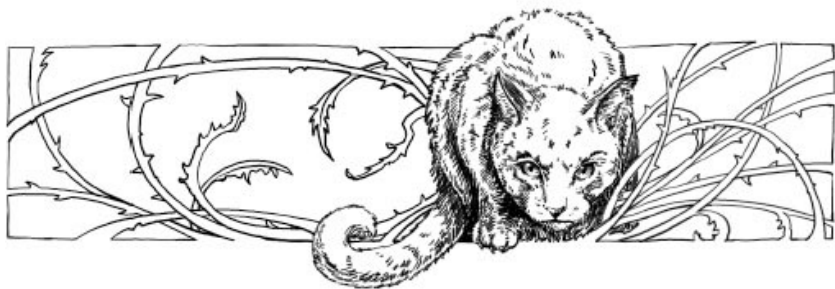
Quickly he placed his paw on the other kit. Now he saw the four giant oaks silhouetted against the night sky, felt the cool stone of the Great Rock beneath his paws, watched the Clans swirl in the hollow below. He heard the roar of battle and tasted the sweetness of victory, echoed in the cheers of his warriors. "And this one will be ThunderClan's leader," he declared. He stared at Cloudberry, his head whirling. "We have to tell Doestar! These kits are truly special!"

He jumped up, but Cloudberry blocked his way with her tail. "Every kit is special," she told him fiercely. "You may think you know what will happen, but StarClan knows better than any of us. Let these kits grow up like any other, without the burden of knowing their future."

Goosefeather frowned. "I didn't have a chance to grow up like other kits," he growled. "You knew I was going to be a medicine cat."

The old white cat sighed. "You were always different, Goosefeather. I know it's hard, but you have to keep what you have seen to yourself this time." She rested the tip of her tail on Goosefeather's shoulder. "You have a very precious gift, young one. Sometimes it will feel like a burden, but I believe that StarClan has given it to you for a reason, so you must always be grateful for it and treat it with care."

She glanced over her shoulder at the kits, who were snuffling at Larksong's belly with milky muzzles. "Now let's leave these perfect little bundles to get some rest. It's time to tell their Clanmates the good news."



CHAPTER EIGHT



As the moons rolled into leaf-bare, more and more kits were born, until Goosefeather could hardly squeeze into the nursery. Harepounce gave birth to a pair of pale-furred she-cats, Specklekit and Whitekit, and Rainfur joined her soon after with Dapplekit, Tawnykit, and Thrushkit. Cloudberry insisted on dealing with the births on her own, sending Goosefeather to fetch soaked moss and fresh bedding instead. Goosefeather knew she didn't want him to touch the newborn kits for fear he would see their entire future unroll.

Meanwhile Larksong's brace of toms, Sunkit and Featherkit, grew into strong little cats, ready to nip Goosefeather's tail when he wasn't watching, or shred their freshly laid nest with their thorn-sharp teeth. As soon as their eyes were open, Larksong shoed them out of the nursery to give the other queens some peace. Her sons tottered about the clearing on sturdy legs, fur fluffed up against the cold. A tendrill of ivy lay on the ground beside the half-tree, and the kits pounced on it with ferocious squeaks.

"Did you see Sunkit jump just then?" Goosefeather mewed to Cloudberry. They were at the fresh-kill pile, choosing a soft piece of prey for Nettlebreeze, who was complaining of toothache. "He's already more powerful than his brother."

Cloudberry looked at Goosefeather, her yellow eyes wary. "Be careful," she murmured. "Don't let the kits hear you say that."

Goosefeather let out a hiss of irritation. "I was only making an observation!"

His mentor shook her head. "You see his future every time you look at him. Don't let that blind you to what is happening now, Goosefeather."

"I can't take away what I have seen," Goosefeather growled. "The fact that Sunkit is going to grow up to be our leader makes him special."

"All kits are special!" Cloudberry flashed. "To their mothers, they are the most perfect creatures that ever walked in the forest. But as medicine cats, we must treat our Clanmates as equals. None is more deserving of our care than another. You should know that by now."

She broke off as Doestar approached. The pale-furred leader looked at the

fresh-kill pile. "Has every cat eaten yet?" she asked.

"Almost," Cloudberry meowed. "Here, you could take the remains of this squirrel." She pushed it toward Doestar, but the she-cat backed away.

"Save it for the queens. I'm not hungry."

"You have to eat," Cloudberry murmured. "Your warriors don't want to see you starve yourself."

Doestar flicked the tip of her tail. "There are too many hungry mouths in ThunderClan," she mewed. "Three litters born at the start of leaf-bare! How will we feed them all?"

"Like we always do, with clever hunting," Cloudberry insisted. "Trust your warriors, Doestar. ThunderClan will survive."

Goosefeather looked down at the vole he had chosen. It was plump and thickly furred, and its unseeing eyes were bright. If StarClan continued to send them such healthy prey, they would hardly notice leaf-bare passing through the forest.

Goosefeather opened his eyes with a start. The air inside the medicine cats' den was bitterly cold, and there was just enough moonlight filtering through the cleft in the rock to show his breath hanging in clouds above his nest. Goosefeather stretched and felt the chill pierce his fur as he uncurled. Beside him, Cloudberry was snoring gently in her own nest, her thick tail over her nose.

Goosefeather felt too restless to go back to sleep. He slid out of his nest and padded out of the den. The ferns were crisp with frost, and the moon was barely a claw-scratch in the clear indigo sky. Goosefeather winced as he followed the path to the clearing. The ground was hard as stone beneath his paws, and he was so cold he could hardly breathe. The air was completely still, and the only sound came from an owl somewhere in the distance, calling to its mate. Goosefeather paused. That wasn't the only sound he could hear. A faint moaning was coming from one of the dens.

He ran into the clearing and stopped dead in horror. His Clanmates staggered around him, ribs sticking out of scabby pelts, eyes bulging from sharp-edged faces. The air was thick with wails of pain and the low, steady keening of a cat lost in grief. Two cats, Squirrelwhisker and Rooktail, clawed at the place where the fresh-kill pile had been; it was nothing now but a few scraps of fur and a scattering of tiny bones. A ginger shape lay slumped in the middle of the clearing, eyes open and clouded. To Goosefeather's dismay, none of the other cats paid any attention to it. Instead they stepped over the dead cat's crumpled legs, blinded and numb from hunger.

A few cats watched from the edge of the clearing, their pelts sleek and glossy, their bellies plump with food. But their eyes were filled with sorrow, and Goosefeather knew that these were StarClan cats, the dead cats he saw every day among his Clanmates. Waves of grief came from them as they watched the living cats starve.

Goosefeather felt heavy wetness clinging to his belly fur and looked down to see that he was standing in thick snow. A bleak-eyed, hunch-shouldered cat lurched close to him. "Daisytoe?" Goosefeather whispered. The she-cat didn't hear him. She stumbled to the fresh-kill pile and leaned on Rooktail.

"You said you would go out hunting," she rasped. Her gaunt flanks heaved as she fought for breath.

The black tom flicked his tail. "I did," he growled. "But there's no prey in this snow."

"We're all going to die!" wailed Squirrelwhisker, grinding her paws into the remains of the fresh-kill pile.

"No!" Goosefeather yowled. "I won't let this happen!"

The cats vanished, and he was alone in the moonlit clearing. He whirled around and raced to the den beneath Highrock.

"Doestar! Wake up!"

He burst into the musty darkness and blinked. The leader sat up in her nest, her fur ruffled from sleep.

"Goosefeather! What's wrong?"

"The Clan is starving!" he wailed. "This leaf-bare is too harsh. There is no prey and we are all going to die!"

Doestar bounded across the den and pressed her shoulder against Goosefeather. She felt warm and solid, and he started to breathe more steadily. "Calm down," she told him. "Have you had a vision?"

Goosefeather nodded. "It was snowy and cold . . . more cold than it has ever been. The fresh-kill pile was empty, and there was nothing for hunting patrols to catch. Cats were dying from hunger . . ." He trailed off, picturing the dead ginger cat lying alone in the center of the camp.

There was a stir at the entrance to Doestar's den, and Pineheart appeared. "Is everything okay?" he meowed. "I was returning from the dirtplace and saw Goosefeather coming in."

"Goosefeather has had a vision," Doestar explained. "This is going to be a harder leaf-bare than usual, it seems." Her voice was even, but Goosefeather could feel her heart thudding beneath her fur.

Pineheart looked at Goosefeather. "Did your vision show you a way to survive what's coming?" There was an edge to his voice, and Goosefeather swallowed the urge to hiss at him. One day Pineheart would be leader and Goosefeather would be his only medicine cat; he had to keep peace with the deputy now and win his trust.

"No," he admitted. "But we have a chance to do something, now that we have been warned."

Doestar nodded to Goosefeather. "I want Cloudberry to hear this as well. Fetch her, please."

Goosefeather ran into the icy air and woke the old medicine cat. She sat in the leader's den and listened quietly as Goosefeather explained what he had seen.

"We'll have to find a different source of prey," mewled Doestar, pacing across the cave and back again. "Should we expand the territory? Send cats into Twolegplace?"

Pineheart flicked his ears. "I can't see our warriors being happy about that. But perhaps we could set borders around the treecutplace. I don't think we'd be challenged if we wanted to hunt there."

Cloudberry was gazing into the distance. "There is something we could try," she murmured. "I remember a very cold leaf-bare when I was a kit in RiverClan. The river froze, trapping all the fish. Some warriors broke off a piece of ice at the edge of the river and brought it back to the camp. It contained a fish, stone-cold and dead. But when the warmth of the dens melted the ice around it, the fish was

perfect fresh-kill. Somehow the ice had kept it fresh."

Goosefeather tipped his head on one side. "Are you saying we should wait for the river to freeze, and eat fish?"

"No. I think we should find a way to keep our own prey fresh for when we have nothing else to eat," Cloudberry mewed.

"But we don't have enough water on our territory," Pineheart pointed out.

"Maybe not," meowed Doestar, flicking her tail. "But what if the same thing happens in the ground? We know the earth freezes when it gets very cold. If we buried the fresh-kill, wouldn't it freeze too? Then we could dig it up when we need it."

Goosefeather nodded, his fur bristling with excitement. "If we send out extra hunting patrols for the next moon, we could store enough food to last until newleaf!"

"I'll split the dawn patrol and send half out to hunt," Pineheart meowed. "And the apprentices can hunt instead of battle training later on."

"We don't want to risk the strength of our Clan in battle," Doestar warned.

Her deputy looked at her. "The greatest risk is starving to death, wouldn't you say?" he mewed softly.

Doestar nodded, her eyes troubled. "Goosefeather, tell no one else about your vision. I don't want any cat to panic. We can say that we are preparing for the chance of a hard leaf-bare, but no cat must know what you have foreseen."

Goosefeather dipped his head. *As usual*, he thought. Doestar and Cloudberry were always concerned about how his Clanmates might react to his powers. *What about me? Don't they worry about how I feel, carrying the weight of ThunderClan's future all by myself?*

Within three sunrises, the camp had been transformed. The clearing was dotted with large holes, each a full fox-length across, dug by the cats with sharpest claws and strongest front legs. As Goosefeather was weaving between the holes to the gorse tunnel, Stormtail looked up from his freshly turned pile of soil.

"Is this something to do with you?" he growled, flicking earth from his whiskers.

Goosefeather stepped out of the way as Adderfang staggered past with a dead squirrel, which he dropped into Stormtail's hole. "Doestar wants to be sure we are prepared for leaf-bare," Goosefeather meowed. "Have you forgotten how many kits have been born this moon?"

The gray warrior began scraping soil over the squirrel. "We've never done anything like this before. Have you been seeing things?" He glanced sideways at Goosefeather.

Goosefeather leaned close to him. "You'd better believe I can see the future, Stormtail. Aren't you curious about what's going to happen to *you*?" Without giving the warrior a chance to reply, he turned away.

He had to wait for a hunting patrol to bring in the latest catch before he could enter the gorse tunnel. He watched Flashnose and Rainfur deposit a pigeon and two mice into a hole dug by Rockfall and Heronpaw. The dark brown apprentice was dusted with earth, and one of his claws was bleeding. Goosefeather reminded himself to check all the apprentices' paws at the end of the day.

He slipped through the gorse and climbed out of the ravine. For a while, Beetail padded beside him, the StarClan cat keeping him silent company through

the bracken. The air was dry and cold, with heavy yellow clouds looming over the tops of the trees. There was a light wind that rattled the bare branches and ruffled Goosefeather's fur.

Tucking his nose into his chest fur, he trotted along the path that led to Snakerocks, where one remaining patch of catmint grew. Cloudberry wanted to preserve some leaves before they were spoiled by frost. He could hear a hunting patrol near the border with Twolegplace; one of the apprentices was chasing a squirrel, cheered on by Moonpaw and Rabbitpaw. Goosefeather stayed away from the squirrel's route and padded into the grassy space at the foot of the smooth gray boulders known as Snakerocks.

As he looked at the deep cracks and clefts in the rocks, his ears started to buzz, and he felt the ground dip under his feet. Two she-cats were hissing at each other. Goosefeather recognized one of them as Mapleshade, the cat who had taught him how to fight after the badger attack. The other had speckled golden fur and sad, haunted eyes. She was accusing Mapleshade of betraying her brother. She lunged at Mapleshade; the tortoiseshell-and-white cat stepped back, sending the golden cat stumbling into a pile of stones. There was a flicker of movement as something long and sinuous rose up from behind the nearest rock. The golden she-cat leaped away with a shriek.

"Adder! It bit me! Help!"

Mapleshade let out a hiss. "Like you helped my kits? Never! I hope you die in agony!"

Goosefeather watched in horror as the gold-furred cat writhed on the ground. Mapleshade turned and walked into the bracken. The golden cat faded away and the clearing was empty once more.

Goosefeather felt eyes burning into his pelt. He spun around. Mapleshade was watching him from on top of a rock. "What's the matter?" she asked. "You look like you just saw a fox eat your own mother."

"Did you really let that cat get bitten by an adder?" Goosefeather demanded. "And leave her here to die?"

Mapleshade looked surprised. "Of course. I hate every cat in ThunderClan, and will not rest until I have had vengeance on every last one."

"But—but you helped me," Goosefeather stammered. "You showed me how to fight after the badger attacked me, remember? That wasn't vengeance."

Mapleshade's eyes gleamed. "I have no need to punish you," she growled. "You are doomed already. StarClan has seen to that."

"What do you mean?" Goosefeather demanded. Mapleshade started to walk away. "Come back! Why do you think I'm doomed? You have to tell me!"

But the she-cat had vanished, and Goosefeather was standing alone in the clearing, shivering and breathless with fear. *All these visions*, he thought. *And yet I've never seen my own future. . . .*



CHAPTER NINE



"I am proud to announce three new litters of kits in ThunderClan." Doestar's voice rang through the hollow above the heads of the listening cats. Behind her, the other leaders were outlined in silver from frosty moonlight.

Houndstar, the ShadowClan leader, leaned over to Volestar of RiverClan. Goosefeather heard him mutter, "So close to leaf-bare? Those warriors won't like having to catch prey for so many hungry mouths!"

Doestar must have overheard, because she continued. "ThunderClan is well prepared for leaf-bare. My Clan will grow strong through the coldest moons, and I will bring you our new apprentices when the warm weather returns!"

There were cheers from the ThunderClan cats, and Chiveclaw, the WindClan medicine cat, mewed to Cloudberry, "You'll be busy with all those little ones!"

Cloudberry nodded. "Thank StarClan, they are all fit and well. Noisy, though!"

Echosnout of RiverClan snorted. "In my day, kits knew when to keep quiet."

Cloudberry flicked her ears. "In your day, Echosnout, I was one of those kits under your care, and I don't remember being quiet at all!"

The old she-cat huffed and turned away. Above them on the Great Rock, the WindClan leader, Heatherstar, had stepped forward and was reporting a black-and-white dog loose on the moor. Her warriors had chased it down to the Thunderpath, where a Twoleg caught it.

"I gave it a scratch that it won't forget in a hurry," purred Dawnstripe, a cream-striped golden tabby.

A brisk wind rattled the branches of the giant oaks, sending a flurry of raindrops spattering into the hollow. Houndstar jumped to his paws. "We should get home before the rain starts," he called. "Come, ShadowClan!"

The tangle of cats parted smoothly in four directions, streaming up out of the hollow and plunging into the forest. Goosefeather ran beside his mother. Daisytoe was limping slightly from an ache in her haunches; with a shock, Goosefeather realized that his mother was growing old. He stayed close to her as they made their way through the trees. Thick clouds had blown in to cover the full moon, and raindrops pattered steadily onto the branches.

The ThunderClan cats raced down the side of the ravine and bounded into their camp. The cats who had stayed behind came out to hear the news from the Gathering, then retreated quickly into their dens as the rain pelted down. Goosefeather followed Cloudberry into their den beneath the rock. Their pelts steamed in the damp air. Cloudberry shook herself, sending drops flying onto Goosefeather's muzzle.

"I'd rather it was cold than wet," she complained. "This weather gets into my bones now." She climbed stiffly into her nest and curled up. Goosefeather pulled some feathers over her flanks to keep her warm.

"The wind is strong enough to blow the rain away," he meowed. "It will be dry by dawn."

But it wasn't. Goosefeather was woken by the thrumming of raindrops on the rock above his head. Outside, the browning ferns were half flattened, and the clearing was awash with rivulets. Warriors ran from den to den hunched against the windblown rain, and the fresh-kill pile was sitting in a brackish puddle.

Pineheart surveyed it with a frown. "We'll have to move it to higher ground," he meowed. "I'll get Mumblefoot and Rooktail to do that as soon as they return from the dawn patrol."

Mistpelt emerged from the elders' den on her way to the dirtplace and hissed as her paws sank into mud. "Whose bright idea was it to dig up half the clearing?" she muttered. "If it keeps raining, we'll all sink up to our necks!"

Goosefeather looked at the freshly turned soil that marked the storage places for fresh-kill. Each one bubbled with liquid brown sludge. He pictured the prey underneath, soaked through and festering. . . . "Pineheart!" he yowled. "The fresh-kill will be ruined! We have to dig it up and take it somewhere dry!"

The deputy stared at him. "But we've only just buried it! Where else can we put it? The ground will be soaked everywhere in the forest."

Goosefeather was already scraping at the nearest patch of mud. "We can't waste time thinking about that. We have to dig it up before it rots!"

He was dimly aware of Pineheart running to the warriors' den and summoning the cats still in their nests. Harepounce ran from the nursery and started digging alongside Goosefeather. Her light brown pelt was soon smothered in wet earth, and her whiskers were thick with sludge, but she kept scratching until their paws hit a lump of sodden fur.

"It's a vole," Harepounce panted. She crouched down and hauled at it with her teeth. Goosefeather scrabbled at the soil on the other side of the fresh-kill. With a squelch the vole was pulled free, and Harepounce sat back on her haunches.

Goosefeather gazed down at the vole in dismay. Its flanks had caved in, the flesh eaten away by fat white maggots, which writhed in the shriveled fur. The remains of the creature stank worse than crow-food, and greasy slime was oozing out of it, soaking Goosefeather's paws.

"It's ruined," Harepounce whispered.

All around them, warriors were digging up more rotten prey. Soaked, maggoty, and wasted away to nothing, their precious stores were useless. Goosefeather looked up and saw Doestar standing below Highrock, her eyes dark with fear. Pineheart was standing beside her, his tail lashing as he promised to send out more patrols, restock the stores. But there was a weight in Goosefeather's belly like cold stone. His vision was going to come true. There was

nothing he could do to save his Clanmates from starvation.

Harepounce died first, refusing to eat a mouthful from the moment they dug up the rotten prey and instead giving all her meager share to her kits. The rain stopped and snow came, smothering the forest into silent whiteness, which was pierced by moans of pain and hunger. Pineheart kept sending out hunting patrols, but again and again they returned empty-pawed.

Goosefeather and Cloudberry turned their paws raw from scraping in the snow in search of leaves to soothe the bellyache and ward off coughs and fever. Flashnose died from a bout of sickness that racked her body with terrible spasms, and Stagleap and Hollypelt faded soon after. By the time Nettlebreeze slipped into a slumber from which he couldn't awake, sprawled in the middle of the clearing on his way back from the dirtplace, none of the cats were strong enough to move his body. A circle of StarClan cats gathered around the dead tom, their pelts noticeably shiny amid the mangy, dull-eyed warriors.

Goosefeather stared down at the stiffening ginger cat softly being covered with snowflakes and felt a surge of molten fury in his belly. Swiftbreeze staggered past, almost tripping over one of Nettlebreeze's legs.

"Careful!" Goosefeather hissed.

The tabby-and-white she-cat turned to him with clouded, vacant eyes. A scrap of bark clung to her whiskers. Goosefeather knew that some of the warriors had started chewing twigs in an effort to fill their empty bellies.

"He can't feel anything now," Swiftbreeze rasped, sounding older than stone.

"He still deserves our respect," Goosefeather mewed. He was too weak to move Nettlebreeze himself, but he tried to tuck the dead cat's legs under his belly so that no one else would fall over him.

He heard paw steps crunching over the snow and looked up to see Cloudberry limping toward him. The medicine cat looked hollow beneath her white fur, and her teeth seemed too large for her mouth. "Rabbitpaw dug up some worms today," she croaked. "I'm sharing them with Rainfur and the kits. Do you want one?"

Goosefeather pictured the slimy, throbbing creature and gagged. "It's okay," he mewed. "Save them for yourself." He gently picked up Nettlebreeze's tail in his jaws and draped it over the ginger cat's back.

"We did everything we could," Cloudberry whispered close to his ear. Her breath smelled rotten. "It's not your fault we couldn't stop this happening. The rain spoiling all our prey was just bad luck."

Goosefeather lifted his head and looked at her. "There is no such thing as bad luck," he told her. "Only destiny. I knew this was coming. But everything I did just made it worse."

He turned and plunged through the snow toward the gorse tunnel. Churned slush showed where a patrol had gone out in the hope of finding something to eat. Goosefeather scrambled up the ravine and walked into the silent forest.

How had he ever thought his visions were a gift? StarClan hadn't blessed him; they had cursed him instead. He would always know the worst that would happen, and be powerless to change it. Mapleshade was right: He was doomed.

"Goosefeather?"

A soft voice made him stop and look around. A familiar dark brown figure was

waiting beneath a patch of bracken.

“Pearnose!”

The dead cat looked more alive than any of his Clanmates. Goosefeather padded up to her, inhaling her sweet, leaf-fresh scent.

“I have seen what is happening in ThunderClan,” Pearnose murmured. “My heart is breaking for you all.”

Goosefeather closed his eyes and fought down the urge to wail like a kit. “I can’t believe there was nothing we could do to stop it. I knew what was coming!”

The she-cat licked the top of his head. “You walk a difficult path, my friend. You must learn that it is not your role to change the future. Instead, all you can do is shine a light through the darkness, like the tiniest flame. Your Clanmates must deal with their destinies as they unfold. You cannot be responsible for all of them.”

Goosefeather let out a long sigh. “Then my gift is useless,” he whispered. “Without power, everything I see, everything I know, will bring me nothing but pain.” He lifted his head and opened his mouth in a yowl. “StarClan! Why have you done this to me?”



CHAPTER TEN



The snow did not last forever. The days lengthened, and the biting chill left the air. The forest echoed with the sound of dripping water, and tiny green buds appeared on the trees. The ThunderClan cats emerged, weak and blinking, from the moons of darkness and horror.

On the first day of sunshine, Doestar summoned her Clanmates to give the apprentices their warrior names. "They have fought hunger alongside us," she declared, "with the courage of lions and the loyalty of true warriors. Moonflower, Poppydawn, Heronwing, and Rabbitleap, your Clan welcomes you."

Goosefeather cheered his sister's new name with a burst of pride. She had never given up hope during the hungry moons, never stopped looking for food or caring for her Clanmates. Then Goosefeather saw Stormtail watching Moonflower with a light in his eyes that made Goosefeather's stomach clench. Of all the warriors, would Moonflower choose him as her mate? Goosefeather didn't need a vision of the future to know the answer.

Beside him, Cloudberry wheezed, breaking into his thoughts. Goosefeather turned to his mentor. "Go lie down in the sun," he urged. "I'm going to forage for catmint today. You should take some."

Cloudberry shook her head. "I'm fine," she rasped. "But it's a good idea to look for herbs. Specklekit was complaining of bellyache this morning. I think it's because she's had a good feed from Rainfur for the first time since her mother died, but we could give her something to ease the pain."

Rainfur had brought the kits into the clearing to watch the warrior ceremony. The queen had suckled all five since Harepounce's death, and she looked like a ragged pelt draped over empty bones. But the kits had survived, and Rainfur was given first choice of every piece of fresh-kill now that prey was returning to the forest.

"See if you can find some chervil, too," Cloudberry added.

Goosefeather looked at her in surprise. "Is there sickness in the camp?"

"It's always good to have some in stock," Cloudberry replied carefully, but Goosefeather saw her gaze flit to Doestar, who was climbing down from

Highrock. The leader looked as thin as her Clanmates, her pelt ragged and her breath rasping in her chest. As she passed Goosefeather, he realized that her eyes were sore and oozing, and she smelled faintly of the dirtplace, as if she had made one visit too many.

"Is Doestar sick?" he whispered to Cloudberry.

The medicine cat was watching Doestar limp into her den. "I will care for her myself," she announced without directly answering. "Let no other cat into the den. Food and soaked moss must be left outside. And whatever herbs you can find, bring them straight to me." She paused and looked at Goosefeather. "Don't let any cat know that Doestar is ill. This is her last life, and it would panic them too much to think of losing their leader now." She rested her tail on Goosefeather's shoulder. "A medicine cat keeps many secrets," she murmured.

Goosefeather ran into the forest and gathered every medicine he could find, even alder bark, which was used for toothache, and blackberry leaves, which eased bee stings. He figured nothing could hurt Doestar now, and one of them might help unexpectedly. Back at the camp he sent Moonflower for soaked moss; the she-cat grew round-eyed with worry at the urgency in Goosefeather's tone, but he told her that Doestar was merely exhausted and needed to rest to regain her strength.

He chose the biggest mouse from the newly stocked fresh-kill pile and dragged the food and wet moss to the entrance to the den beneath Highrock. "Cloudberry!" he called softly.

The white cat peeked out. "Are you alone?" she rasped. Goosefeather nodded. "Good. Let no other cat come near." Cloudberry reached out and pulled the mouse toward her. Then she looked at Goosefeather. "Will you stay here tonight?" she asked quietly. "I . . . I'd like to know you are close by."

"Of course," Goosefeather whispered. He pushed the soaked moss into the mouth of the den, then circled to make a scoop in the earth that was comfortable enough for sleeping. He rested his chin on his paws and watched the stars strengthen in the darkening sky. *StarClan, watch over Doestar, he prayed. She has suffered so much. Let her live to see her Clan grow well again.*

He was woken at dawn by a stir of movement at the mouth of the den. Cloudberry stood there, her shoulders slumped with exhaustion. "She's gone."

Goosefeather swallowed the lump of grief that rose in his throat. "Shall I help you wash her?"

Cloudberry shook her head. "I'll do it. And no other cat must come near her during the vigil. Whatever Doestar had, we cannot let it spread. We are all too weak to fight this sickness."

What about you? Goosefeather wanted to wail. But he said nothing. He knew what Cloudberry was doing, and he could only honor her by following her wishes exactly.

As the sun began to slide behind the treetops, Cloudberry hauled Doestar out of the den. Goosefeather had already warned his Clanmates to stay back, so the cats watched in horrified silence as Cloudberry staggered across the clearing, her jaws clenched firmly in Doestar's creamy ruff. She stopped in the center of the clearing and looked around. "You can honor our leader without putting yourselves in danger from her sickness," she rasped. "Please, for your own sake, stay back." She lay down and rested her nose against Doestar's cheek. The leader's

clouded eyes stared up at the sky.

One by one, the ThunderClan cats walked past at a careful distance. Fallsong was coughing, and Goosefeather reminded himself to give her catmint. She didn't have greencough yet, but he wasn't prepared to wait. When he looked at Doestar's unmoving body, he saw another cat stretched out beside her, cold and lifeless, thick white fur stirring faintly in the breeze. They would be sitting vigil for Cloudberry soon, leaving him as ThunderClan's only medicine cat. Lying down at the edge of the clearing, he dozed off, trying to recall all the herbs he needed to restock his stores.

Cloudberry woke him at dawn. "I will bury Doestar," she told him. "You must take Pineheart to the Moonstone for his nine lives ceremony. I am too weak to make the journey. You know what to do, don't you?"

Numb, Goosefeather nodded. He felt as if Cloudberry were being pulled away from him, growing more and more distant until she was only a claw-point of light in swirling darkness. As if she could read his thoughts, Cloudberry mewed, "You have been a good apprentice, Goosefeather, and you will be a good medicine cat. Trust your instincts and remember everything I have taught you." She leaned her forehead against him. "Good-bye, my friend."

Goosefeather struggled to speak around the lump in his throat. "I don't want to leave you," he whispered.

"But I must leave you," Cloudberry replied. "You are not the only cat who is powerless to change the future." She lifted her head and gazed at him. "I don't envy you what you can see, Goosefeather. You must learn to live with the most terrible knowledge. Put your Clan first in all things, and may StarClan light your path, always."

She turned away, leaving Goosefeather chilled with sorrow. Pineheart padded up to him. "Shall we go?" he asked softly. The red-brown tom's eyes were wet with grief. He glanced at Doestar's body. "I never thought this would happen so soon," he murmured. "I don't know if I will be half the leader she was."

"Doestar will watch over you from StarClan," mewed Goosefeather. "You'll be fine."

"Really?" There was a flicker of hope in Pineheart's eyes. "Have you had a vision?"

Distracted by the sight of Cloudberry bending over the dead leader once more, Goosefeather nodded. Then he braced himself. "Come, we have a long journey ahead of us." He led Pineheart out of the camp, feeling the gazes of his Clanmates burning into his fur. They were the new leader and medicine cat. The future lay on their shoulders.

They reached Mothermouth as night was falling. It had taken longer than usual to reach Highstones because both cats were still weak from the Great Hunger, yet unable to eat because of the ceremony that lay ahead. Pineheart hesitated at the mouth of the tunnel, but Goosefeather plunged into the shadows, the cold stone familiar beneath his paws. After a moment he heard Pineheart following him, his breath loud in the confines of the winding passage.

The Moonstone sparkled faintly when they entered the cavern. Without speaking, Goosefeather and Pineheart lay down with their muzzles touching the base of the crystal. Goosefeather felt eyes watching him from the edges of the

cave, heard the whispers just beyond his hearing, but ignored them and concentrated on slipping into the darkness that waited for him.

He found himself standing in a clearing in the forest—not a place that he recognized, exactly, but filled with familiar scents and warmed by sunshine. Pinestar, the new leader of ThunderClan, stood in the middle of the grassy space, surrounded by nine cats with starlit fur and glowing eyes. Among them was Pearnose, who nodded to Goosefeather. One by one, the StarClan cats stepped forward and gave Pinestar a life: for courage, for loyalty, for knowing when to fight and when to pursue peace instead. Pearnose gave him a life for appreciating the work of a medicine cat and trusting the wisdom of this companion throughout his leadership.

As the ninth cat moved forward, a long-legged gray tom with piercing blue eyes, Goosefeather's ears started to buzz. The grassy clearing vanished and Goosefeather was standing in a sharply scented, too-colorful enclosure with a red stone Twoleg den looming over him. His heart pounded with fear, and he crouched down, ready to leap over the wooden border behind him and flee into the forest. Then he noticed a cat in front of him: sturdy, thick-furred, with a reddish-brown pelt. Pinestar!

A gap appeared in the side of the den, and a Twoleg stepped out. Pinestar trotted up and arched himself against the creature's legs, purring and pressing against the hairless pink paw that reached down to stroke him. Goosefeather staggered backward. He tried to call out to his leader, but no sound came out. Pinestar reared up on his hind legs and patted the Twoleg's knees. Then he followed the Twoleg into the den, still purring, and the gap closed behind him with a snap.

Goosefeather stared after him in horror. The red stone den and the brightly colored flowers around him faded away, and he was back in the clearing. The starlit cats had vanished, and Pinestar stood in front of him, trembling with excitement.

"I received my nine lives!" he whispered.

Goosefeather nodded. Pearnose's words rang in his ears. *It is not your role to change the future.* Goosefeather knew that Pinestar was going to betray his Clanmates, Doestar, and every part of the warrior code by leaving the forest to become a kittypet. Every sunrise from now, Goosefeather would wake wondering if this was the day that his leader would abandon his Clan. He couldn't tell any cat, not even Pinestar, because that was not his duty. He could only wait, and watch. He was, as always, cursed to keep his knowledge a secret. He had seen the future.

And there was nothing he could do to change it.

EXCERPT FROM *WARRIORS SUPER EDITION*:
BLUESTAR'S PROPHECY

GOOSEFEATHER'S STORY
CONTINUES IN

— **SUPER EDITION** —

WARRIORS

**BLUESTAR'S
PROPHECY**



Keep reading for an excerpt!



CHAPTER 1



“Shouldn’t she have opened her eyes by now?”

“Hush, Swiftbreeze. She’s only a day old. She’ll open them when she’s ready.”

Bluekit felt the rasp of her mother’s tongue on her flank and nestled closer to Moonflower’s milk-warm belly.

“Snowkit opened hers this morning,” Swiftbreeze reminded her. “And my two had theirs open from almost the moment they were born.” The she-cat’s tail stirred her bedding. “Leopardkit and Patchkit are natural warriors.”

A soft purr sounded from a third queen. “Oh, Swiftbreeze, we all know that no kit can compete with your two,” Poppydawn gently teased.

A small paw poked Bluekit’s side.

Snowkit!

Bluekit mewled with annoyance and snuggled closer to Moonflower.

“Come on, Bluekit!” Snowkit whispered in her ear. “There’s so much to look at and I want to go outside, but Moonflower won’t let me till you’re ready.”

“She’ll open her eyes in her own time,” Moonflower chided.

Yes. In my own time, Bluekit agreed.

Waking, Bluekit could feel the weight of her sister lying on top of her. Moonflower’s belly rose and fell rhythmically beside them. Swiftbreeze was snoring, and Poppydawn wheezed a little as she breathed.

Bluekit heard Leopardkit and Patchkit chattering outside.

“You be the mouse and I’ll be the warrior!” Patchkit was ordering.

“I was the mouse last time!” Leopardkit retorted.

“Were not!”

“Was!”

A scuffle broke out, punctuated by squeaks of defiance.

“Watch where you’re rolling!” came the cross meow of a tom, silencing them for a moment.

“Okay, you be the warrior,” Patchkit agreed. “But I bet you can’t catch me.”
Warrior!

Bluekit wriggled out from under her sister. A newleaf breeze stirred the bramble walls and drifted through the gaps—the same fresh forest smell her father had carried in on his pelt when he’d visited. It chased away the stuffy smell of moss and milk and warm, sleeping fur.

Excitement made Bluekit’s claws twitch. *I’m going to be a warrior!*

For the first time, she stretched open her eyes, blinking against the shafts of light that pierced the bramble roof. The nursery was huge! In darkness, the den had felt small and cozy, but now she could see the brambles arching high overhead, with tiny patches of blue beyond.

Poppydawn lay on her side near one wall, a dark red tabby with a long bushy tail. Bluekit recognized her because she smelled different from Swiftbreeze and Moonflower. There was no milk scent on her; she didn’t have any kits yet. Swiftbreeze, in a nest beside her, was hardly visible—curled in a tight ball with her nose tucked under her tail, her tabby-and-white pelt blotchy against the bracken underneath.

The most familiar scent of all came from behind. Wiggling around, Bluekit gazed at her mother. Sunshine dappled Moonflower’s silver-gray pelt, rippling over the dark stripes that ran along her flank. Her striped face was narrow, and her ears tapered to gentle points. *Do I look like her?* Bluekit looked over her shoulder at her own pelt. It was fluffy, not sleek like Moonflower’s, and was dark gray all over, with no stripes. *Not yet.*

Snowkit, lying stretched on her back, was all white except for her gray ear tips.

“Snowkit!” Bluekit breathed.

“What is it?” Snowkit blinked open her eyes. They were blue.

Are mine blue? Bluekit wondered.

“You’ve opened your eyes!” Snowkit leaped to her paws, wide-awake. “Now we can go out of the nursery!”

Bluekit spotted a hole in the bramble wall, just big enough for two kits to squeeze through. “Patchkit and Leopardkit are already outside. Let’s surprise them!”

Poppydawn raised her head. “Don’t go far,” she murmured sleepily before tucking her nose back under her tail.

“Where are Poppydawn’s kits?” Bluekit whispered.

“They won’t arrive for another two moons,” Snowkit answered.

Arrive? Bluekit tipped her head to one side. *Where from?*

Snowkit was already heading for the hole, scrambling clumsily over Moonflower. Bluekit tumbled after, her short legs uncertain as she slid down her mother’s back and landed in the soft moss.

The nest rustled and Bluekit felt a soft paw clamp her tail-tip to the ground. “Where do you think you are going?”

Moonflower was awake.

Bluekit turned and blinked at her mother. “Outside.”

Moonflower’s eyes glowed and a loud purr rolled in her throat. “You’ve opened your eyes.” She sounded relieved.

“I decided it was time,” Bluekit replied proudly.

"There, Swiftbreeze." Moonflower turned, waking the tabby-and-white queen with her satisfied mew. "I told you she'd do it when she was ready."

Swiftbreeze sat up and gave her paw a lick. "Of course. I was only thinking of my own kits—they opened their eyes sooner." She swiped her paw across her muzzle, smoothing the fur on her nose.

Moonflower turned back to her kits. "So now you're going out to see the world?"

"Why not?" Bluekit mewed. "Leopardkit and Patchkit are already out there."

"Leopardkit and Patchkit are five moons old," Moonflower told her. "They're much bigger than you, so they're allowed to play outside."

Bluekit opened her eyes very wide. "Is it dangerous?"

Moonflower shook her head. "Not in the camp."

"Then we can go!"

Moonflower sighed, then leaned down to smooth Bluekit's fur with her tongue. "I suppose you have to leave the nursery sometime." She studied Snowkit. "Straighten your whiskers." Pride lit the queen's amber gaze. "I want you to look perfect when you meet the Clan."

Snowkit ran a licked paw over each spray of whiskers.

Bluekit looked up at her mother. "Are you coming with us?"

"Do you want me to?"

Bluekit shook her head. "We're going to surprise Patchkit and Leopardkit."

"Your first prey." Moonflower's whiskers twitched. "Off you go, then."

Bluekit bounced around and sprinted for the gap.

"Don't get under any cat's paws!" Moonflower called after them as Bluekit barged ahead of her sister and headed through the hole. "And stay together!"

The brambles scraped Bluekit's pelt as she wriggled out of the nursery. When she tumbled onto the ground beyond, sunshine stung her eyes. She blinked away the glare, and the camp opened out in front of her like a dream. A vast, sandy clearing stretched away to a rock that cast a shadow so long it almost touched her paw tips. Two warriors sat beneath the rock, sharing prey beside a clump of nettles. Beyond them lay a fallen tree, its tangled branches folded on the ground like a heap of skinny, hairless legs. Several tail-lengths away from the nursery a wide, low bush spread its branches over the ground. Ferns crowded a corner at the nursery's other side, and behind them rose a barrier of gorse so tall that Bluekit had to crane her neck to see the top.

Excitement thrilled through her. This was her territory! Her paws prickled. Would she ever know her way around?

There was no sign of Patchkit or Leopardkit.

"Where've they gone?" she called to Snowkit.

Snowkit was staring around the camp. "I don't know," she meowed absently. "Look at that prey!" She was staring at a heap of birds and mice at the side of the clearing. It was topped by a fat, fluffy squirrel.

"The fresh-kill pile!" Bluekit bounced toward it, her nose twitching. She'd heard the queens in the nursery talking about prey, and she'd smelled squirrel on her mother's fur. What would it taste like? Thrusting her nose into the pile, she tried to sink her claws into a small creature with short brown fur and a long, thin tail.

"Watch out!"

Snowkit's warning came too late. Bluekit's paws buckled as the plump squirrel rolled off the top of the pile and flattened her. *Ooof!*

Purrs of amusement erupted from the two warriors beside the nettle patch. "I've never seen fresh-kill attack a cat before!" meowed one of them.

"Careful!" warned the other warrior. "All that fluff might choke you!"

Hot with embarrassment, Bluekit wriggled out from under the squirrel and stared fiercely at the warriors. "It just fell on me!" She didn't want to be remembered as the kit who was jumped on by a dead squirrel.

"Hey, you two!" Bluekit recognized Patchkit from his nursery-scent as he padded out from behind the nursery. "Does your mother know you're outside?"

"Of course!" Bluekit spun around to see her denmate for the first time.

Oh.

She hadn't expected Patchkit to be so big. His black-and-white fur was smooth like a warrior's, and she had to tip her head back to look up at him. She stretched her legs, trying to appear taller.

Leopardkit scampered after her brother, swiping playfully at his tail. Her black coat shone in the sunshine. She stopped and stared in delight when she saw Bluekit and Snowkit. "You've opened your eyes!"

Bluekit licked her chest, trying to smooth down her fluffy fur and wishing her pelt were as sleek as theirs.

"We can show you around," Leopardkit mewed excitedly.

Snowkit bounced around the older kit. "Yes, please!"

Bluekit flicked her tail crossly. She didn't want to be *shown* her territory. She wanted to explore it for herself! But Leopardkit was already trotting toward the wide patch of ferns near the gorse barrier. "This is the apprentices' den," she called over her shoulder. "*We'll* be sleeping there in a moon."

Snowkit raced after her.

"Are you coming?" Patchkit nudged Bluekit.

Bluekit was gazing back at the nursery. "Won't you miss your old nest?" She felt a sudden flicker of anxiety. She liked sleeping next to Moonflower.

"I can't wait to move into my new den!" Patchkit yowled as he darted toward the apprentices' den. "It'll be great to be able to talk without Swiftbreeze telling us to be quiet and go to sleep."

As Bluekit hurried after him, the ferns trembled and a tortoiseshell face poked out between the green fronds.

"Once you start your training," yawned the sleepy-looking apprentice, "you'll be glad to get some sleep."

"Hello, Dapplepaw!" Patchkit skittered to a halt outside the den as the tortoiseshell she-cat stretched, half in and half out of the bush.

Bluekit stared at Dapplepaw's pelt, thick and shiny; the muscles on the she-cat's shoulders rippled as she sprang from the ferns and landed beside Patchkit. Suddenly Bluekit's denmate didn't seem so big after all.

"We're showing Bluekit and Snowkit around the camp," Leopardkit announced. "It's their first time out."

"Don't forget to show them the dirtplace," Dapplepaw joked. "Whitepaw was complaining only this morning about cleaning out the nursery. The place has been filled with kits for moons, and there's more on the way."

Bluekit lifted her chin. "Snowkit and I can keep our nest clean now," she

declared.

Dapplepaw's whiskers quivered. "I'll tell Whitepaw when she gets back from hunting. I'm sure she'll be delighted to hear it."

Is she teasing? Bluekit narrowed her eyes.

"I can't wait to go hunting!" Patchkit dropped into a crouch, his tail weaving like a snake.

Quick as the wind, Dapplepaw pinned it down with her paw. "Don't forget to keep your tail still or the prey will hear you swishing up the leaves."

Patchkit pulled his tail free and straightened it out, flattening it to the ground.

Snowkit stifled a purr. "It sticks out like a twig," she whispered in Bluekit's ear.

Bluekit was watching too intently to reply. She studied how Patchkit had pressed his chest to the ground, how he'd unsheathed his claws and tucked his hind paws right under his body. *I'm going to be the best hunter ThunderClan has ever seen*, she vowed.

"Not bad," Dapplepaw congratulated Patchkit, then glanced at Leopardkit. "Let's see your hunting crouch."

Leopardkit instantly dropped and pressed her belly to the ground.

Bluekit longed to try it, but not until she'd practiced by herself. "Come on, let's leave them to it," she whispered to Snowkit.

Snowkit stared at her in surprise. "Leave them?"

"Let's explore by ourselves." Bluekit saw a chance to slip away unnoticed.

"But it's fun hanging out with . . ."

Bluekit didn't hear any more; she was already backing away. Glancing over her shoulder, she spotted a low, spreading bush beside the nursery. Patchkit and Leopardkit wouldn't find them there. She spun around and dashed for the bush, diving under a branch. As she caught her breath, she tasted lots and lots of different scents clinging to the leaves. How many cats were there in ThunderClan? Did they really all fit in the camp?

The branches shook, and Snowkit crashed in after her.

"I thought you weren't coming!" Bluekit squeaked in surprise.

"Moonflower told us to stay together," Snowkit reminded her.

Together they peeped out to see if Leopardkit, Patchkit, and Dapplepaw had noticed their escape. The three cats were staring at the nursery, looking puzzled.

Dapplepaw shrugged. "They must have gone back to their nest."

"Never mind." Patchkit paced around Dapplepaw. "Now you can take us to the sandy hollow like you promised."

Sandy hollow? What's that? Bluekit suddenly wished she'd stayed with the others.

"I never promised!" Dapplepaw protested.

"We'll be in trouble if we get caught," Leopardkit warned. "We're not supposed to leave the camp until we're apprentices, remember?"

"Then we won't get caught," Patchkit mewed.

Dapplepaw glanced uncertainly around the clearing. "I'll take you to the edge of the ravine," she offered. "But that's all."

Jealousy burned Bluekit's pelt as she watched Dapplepaw lead Leopardkit and Patchkit toward the gorse barrier and disappear through a gap at the base.

Maybe we can follow them and see where they go. . .

Suddenly a muzzle nudged her hindquarters and sent her skidding out from her hiding place. Her sister tumbled after her, and a gray tabby face peered out at them from under the leaves.

"What are you doing here? This is the *warriors'* den!"

"S-sorry!" Snowkit backed away.

Bluekit faced the warrior. "How were we supposed to know?" she protested. *Do warriors have a special scent or something?*

The tabby tom narrowed his eyes. "Are you Moonflower's kits?"

Snowkit's pelt ruffled and she looked down at her paws.

Bluekit lifted her chin. She wasn't scared of the grouchy warrior. "Yes. I'm Bluekit. And this is my sister, Snowkit."

The tabby slid from under the bush and straightened up. He was even bigger than Dapplepaw. Bluekit took a step back.

"I'm Stonepelt," meowed the gray tom. "Are you looking for Stormtail?"

Snowkit glanced up eagerly. "Is he here?"

"He's out hunting."

"We weren't looking for him, actually," Bluekit told the warrior, even though she would have liked to see her father now that her eyes had opened. "We were hiding from Patchkit and Leopardkit."

"Hide-and-seek, I suppose." Stonepelt sighed.

"No," Bluekit corrected him. "They were trying to show us around the camp, but we wanted to explore it for ourselves."

Stonepelt flicked his tail. "A good warrior learns from his Clanmates."

"W-we thought it would be more fun on our own," Snowkit blurted out.

The warrior's pelt bristled. "Well, it's no fun being woken from a well-earned rest by a stampede of kits."

"We're sorry," Snowkit apologized. "We didn't realize."

"That's what happens when kits are left to wander around by themselves." Stonepelt snorted and turned his gaze toward the fresh-kill pile. "Now that I'm awake, I might as well eat." With a flick of his tail, the warrior headed across the clearing, leaving the two kits alone.

Snowkit turned on Bluekit. "Did you have to pick the warriors' den to hide in?" she mewed crossly.

"How was I supposed to know?" Bluekit snapped back.

"We *would* have known if we'd stayed with Patchkit!"

Bluekit flicked her ears. Now they knew where the apprentices' den was, and the warriors'. They had wanted to explore the camp, hadn't they? She gazed across the clearing, waiting for her eyes to stop being blurry. She hadn't tried to see this far away yet. As the rock at the opposite end of the clearing came into focus, she noticed scuffed earth around the base. Paw prints led into the shadows and disappeared where a patch of lichen hung at one side. Where did they lead?

Forgetting that she was cross with Snowkit, Bluekit meowed, "Follow me!" She ran over to the lichen, then reached out and prodded it with her paw. It swung under her touch and then gave way. Her paw sank through the brush and into empty space.

"There's a gap!" Excited, Bluekit pushed her way through and found herself in a quiet cove. Its floor and walls were smooth and, although no cat was there, a nest of moss lay at one side. "It's a den," she hissed back through the lichen to

Snowkit.

"It's Pinestar's den," replied a voice that wasn't her sister's.

Bluekit froze for a moment, then backed cautiously out of the cave. Was she in trouble again?

A pale silver tom with bright amber eyes was sitting beside Snowkit.

"Hello, Bluekit."

Bluekit tilted her head. "How do you know my name?" she asked.

"I was at your kitting," the tom told her. "I'm Featherwhisker, the medicine cat's apprentice." He nodded toward Pinestar's den. "You shouldn't go in there unless you've been invited." His mew was soft but grave.

"I didn't realize it was his den. I just wondered what was behind the lichen." Bluekit looked down at her paws. "Are you going to tell Pinestar?"

"Yes."

Bluekit's heart lurched.

"It's better that I tell him. He'll smell your scent anyway," Featherwhisker explained.

Bluekit looked up at him anxiously. Would Pinestar say she couldn't be a warrior now?

"Don't worry," Featherwhisker reassured her. "He won't be angry. He'll probably admire your curiosity."

"Can I go and look too, then?" Snowkit mewed.

Featherwhisker purred. "One kit's scent will smell like curiosity," he told her. "Two kits' scents will smell like nosiness."

Snowkit's tail drooped.

"I'm sure you'll get a chance to see inside one day," Featherwhisker promised. "Why don't I take you to meet the elders instead? They like meeting the new kits."

Again they were to be shown around! Annoyance prickled in Bluekit's pelt, but she reminded herself what Stonepelt had said: *A good warrior learns from her Clanmates.*

Featherwhisker led them to the fallen tree and squeezed under a jutting branch. Bluekit trotted after, Snowkit at her heels.

Grass, ferns, and moss sprouted from every crevice in the tangle of wood, turning the decaying bark green with newleaf freshness. Bluekit followed Featherwhisker as he weaved his way through a maze of twigs until he reached an open space among the tangled branches.

A mangy brown tom was lying with his back to the fallen trunk, while a tortoiseshell she-cat groomed his ears with her tongue. A second tom, his orange pelt flecked with white, was eating a mouse at the other end of the den.

The tortoiseshell looked up as Featherwhisker entered. "Have you brought mouse bile?" She looked hopeful. "Mumblefoot's got another tick."

"He insists on hunting every day," the orange tom commented. "He's bound to get ticks."

"The day I stop hunting, Weedwhisker, is the day you can sit vigil for me," meowed Mumblefoot.

Weedwhisker took another bite of his mouse. "I'll never stop hunting, either," he muttered with his mouth full. "There aren't enough apprentices to keep us fed these days."

"Patchkit and Leopardkit will be starting their training soon," Featherwhisker reminded them. "And we've got another pair on the way to becoming apprentices." He stepped aside, revealing Bluekit and Snowkit.

Weedwhisker looked up from his mouse. Mumblefoot sat up, pricking his ears.

"Kits!" The tortoiseshell she-cat's eyes brightened, and she hurried forward and gave Bluekit a soggy lick on her cheek. Bluekit ducked away, rubbing her wet face with her paw, then stifled a purr as Snowkit received the same welcome.

"It's their first time out of the nursery, Larksong," Featherwhisker explained. "I caught them trying to make a nest in Pinestar's den."

"We were not—" Bluekit started to object.

"Don't take any notice of Featherwhisker," Larksong interrupted. "He teases all the cats. It's one of the privileges of being medicine cat."

"Medicine cat *apprentice*," Featherwhisker corrected her.

"Huh!" Mumblefoot wrapped his tail over his paws. "Which means *you* do all of Goosefeather's duties while that lazy old badger pretends to look for herbs."

"Hush!" Larksong looked sternly at her denmate. "Goosefeather does his best."

Mumblefoot snorted. "What herb was he supposedly collecting this morning?" he asked Featherwhisker.

The medicine cat apprentice twitched his ears. "Comfrey."

"Well, I saw him sunning himself by the Owl Tree, fast asleep. His snoring was scaring the prey." He flicked his tail toward the morsel that Weedwhisker was enjoying. "It took me an age to find that."

"Goosefeather has taught me a lot," Featherwhisker said in defense of his mentor. "And there's no herb in the forest he doesn't know how to use."

"If he can be bothered to pick them," Mumblefoot muttered.

Featherwhisker glanced at Bluekit and Leopardkit. "Take no notice," he meowed. "Goosefeather and Mumblefoot have never seen eye to eye."

"And you shouldn't be saying such things, Mumblefoot," Larksong scolded. "You know Goosefeather is their kin."

"He is?" Bluekit blinked at the tortoiseshell.

"He was your mother's littermate," Larksong explained. She swept Bluekit and Snowkit forward with her tail. "Come and tell us all about yourselves."

"My name is Bluekit, and this is my sister, Snowkit. Our mother is Moonflower and our father is Stormtail," Bluekit chirped. "And today is the first time we've been out of the nursery!"

Weedwhisker licked his lips as he swallowed the last of the mouse. "Welcome to the Clan, little ones. I'm sure you'll be up to trouble in no time. Kits can't seem to help themselves."

Bluekit pricked her ears. "Have Leopardkit and Patchkit been in trouble?"

Larksong purred. "I don't know a kit who hasn't."

Relief warmed Bluekit's belly. She didn't want to be the only one who got things wrong. *Like having a squirrel fall on my head.*

"It's about time Pinestar made those two apprentices," Mumblefoot croaked. "They have too much time on their paws. Every time I go to the fresh-kill pile, I trip over one of them kicking up dust with some silly game or other."

"I'll ask Swiftbreeze if I can take them herb gathering in the forest tomorrow," Featherwhisker suggested. "That should keep them busy."

Bluekit's eyes grew wide. "In the *forest*?" she echoed.

Featherwhisker nodded. "We won't go far from camp."

That must be where Dapplepaw was taking Patchkit and Leopardkit. Bluekit wondered how much more there was beyond the clearing and the dens.

Beside her, Snowkit yawned.

"You'd better be getting them back to their mother," Larksong advised. "Snowkit looks like she's going to fall asleep on her paws."

Bluekit turned to see her sister's eyes drooping. She suddenly realized that her own legs ached and her belly was rumbling. But she didn't want to leave; she wanted to learn more. What did Mumblefoot's tick look like? Where was Goosefeather now?

"Come on." Featherwhisker began to usher them out of the den.

"How can we learn anything back in the nursery?" Bluekit objected.

"You'll learn a lot more once you've rested," Larksong meowed.

"Come back and see us soon!" Weedwhisker called.

Bluekit stumbled as they crossed the clearing. Though her mind whirled with questions, her paws were clumsy with fatigue. She felt relieved when Featherwhisker nudged her into the nursery.

"What did you see, little one?" Moonflower asked as Bluekit snuggled down beside her mother with Snowkit.

"Everything," Bluekit yawned.

Moonflower purred. "Not *everything*, my darling." Bluekit closed her eyes as her mother went on softly. "There's a whole forest for you to explore. And even that is just part of the Clans' territories. There are lands beyond—Mothermouth, Highstones, and even farther."

"How far does the world stretch?" Snowkit murmured sleepily.

"Only StarClan knows," Moonflower replied.

Bluekit imagined trees and bracken and nettles and gorse stretching far beyond the camp into an endless sky. "But my legs aren't long enough to travel that far," she protested. As her visions faded into dreams, she heard her mother's voice continue.

"They'll grow, my sweet, until one day they'll be strong enough to walk the whole world."

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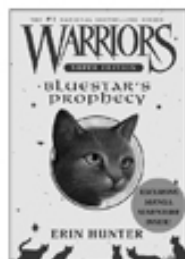
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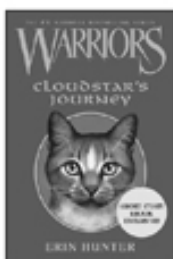
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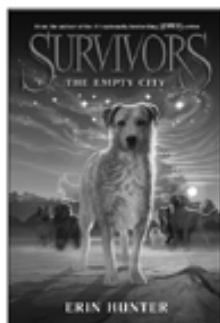
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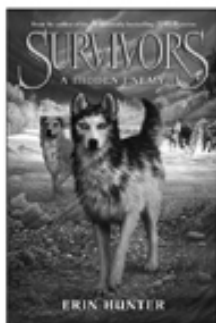
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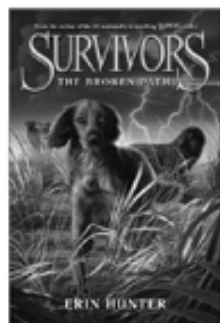
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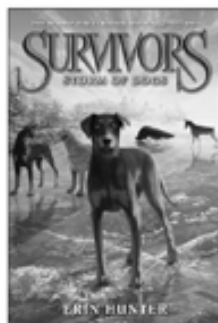
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ERIN HUNTER is inspired by a love of cats and a fascination with the ferocity of the natural world. As well as having great respect for nature in all its forms, Erin enjoys creating rich, mythical explanations for animal behavior. She is also the author of the bestselling *Survivors* and *Seekers* series.

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